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Gender Differences in Coping with Racism: African American Experience and Empowerment

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Abstract

Black men and women encounter multiple forms of racism in American society and require numerous strategies to manage the stress associated with these experiences. This chapter reviews the current state of the literature regarding Black people and how they cope with racism. Findings demonstrate that Black people tend to cope with racism through social support, religion, avoidance, and problem-focused coping, with some gender differences in coping approaches. We also contrast functional versus dysfunctional coping approaches and underscore the importance of empowerment to promote well-being and social change. Limitations of this review include the predominance of American-based samples used in the literature, which often excludes other Black ethnic and national groups. Further, the experiences of other Black intersectional identities are not well represented in the literature and require more study as their experiences of coping with racism may differ.

Keywords: African Americans, racism, discrimination, emotion regulation, coping

1. Introduction

The mental and physical stakes for Black Americans facing racism are high. A Black individual who is regularly exposed to racial discrimination is forced to integrate coping mechanisms into their daily life to combat the many and ongoing adverse effects associated with race-based stress and trauma. Racial trauma (or race-based trauma) refers to the traumatization of racialized people caused by repeated racist experiences [1]. Racism can take many forms and occurs on many levels, including on an institutional, community, and individual/interpersonal basis [2–4]. Racism is an organized system of advantages and disadvantages, founded on the categorization and ranking of racial groups that devalues and disempowers groups considered inferior [5]. Studies have identified a high prevalence of racist incidents experienced by Black Americans; notably, Lee et al. [6] found that over two-thirds encounter racial discrimination from time to time or regularly. Another study found that Black adolescents in the United States must cope with incidences of racial discrimination an average of five times a day [7].

Without specific mechanisms in place to cope with this barrage of racism, Black individuals leave themselves open to significant stress and risk facing racial trauma, which can lead to psychologically taxing responses. Persistent experiences

of racism can lead to mental health problems and even chronic physical health problems [8–10].

The primary, although not exclusive, mechanisms for managing racialized stress includes processes termed “emotion regulation” and “coping”. Although these are distinct concepts, they share some characteristics. This chapter will first describe the role of emotion regulation and coping as protective responses to racism-based stress experienced by Black Americans. We explore gender differences in how Black Americans react to racist incidents and provide recommendations for functional and empowering responses to race-related stress.

1.1 Emotion regulation

Emotion regulation is a critical part of the human experience and daily life. Individuals are subjected to many types of stimuli that require them to regulate their emotions. Emotion regulation has generally been defined as the efforts a person makes to influence which emotions they experience in the moment, as well as the manner in which the emotions are experienced and expressed [11]. Emotion regulation may be conscious or unconscious, automatic or controlled, modified in terms of intensity, duration, amplitude and/or quality, or evaluated as positive or negative [11, 12]. There are many reasons people regulate their emotions. When a person evaluates a situation as being relevant to their goals, emotions emerge [13]. For example, when a person experiences a bad day at work, their goal might be to reduce their anger. To achieve this goal, an individual may resort to writing in a journal to express their emotions or even confide in a friend. Emotion regulation can be understood as the activation of a goal that will change an emotional response [14].

Individuals will typically cycle through different steps or phases when regulating their emotions. For example, when presented with a situation, people are required to evaluate it and create a response. The chronological sequence begins with a situation, followed by attention and evaluation of this event, ending with the emotional response [15]. People go through the steps of this cycle quickly and the responses to each sequence will influence the ones that follow. This is a part of the process model of emotion regulation which was initially described by Gross [16], who details five families of emotion regulation processes [17]: (1) situation selection, in which an individual influences the situation they will be faced with; (2) situation modification, in which one or multiple pertinent aspects of the situation are changed; (3) attentional deployment, which influences what parts of the situation are noticed; (4) cognitive change, in which there are changes in the way the situation is represented cognitively; and (5) response modulation, in which emotion-related actions are directly altered. When a person finds themselves in a situation, at each of these five points in the processing of the experience, emotions can be regulated with the use of specific strategies.

In addition, there are various strategies that individuals may employ to regulate their emotions. The most common strategies used are mindfulness, distraction, rumination, acceptance, problem-solving, worry, reappraisal, behavioral avoidance, experiential avoidance, and expressive suppression [12]. Each of these strategies fall under the umbrella of one of the five families of emotion regulation processes mentioned previously. Using these strategies, individuals are typically able to manage their emotions and respond appropriately to their environment.

1.2 Coping

Emotion regulation is strongly tied to coping. All emotion regulation is a form of coping and involves attempts to regulate one’s emotions specifically in response

to a stressful event [18]. Coping is commonly described as an individual's changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and internal demands that are appraised as taxing or that exceed the person's resources [19]. Coping is a process that happens in response to stress that can change over time and can vary depending on the context. Further, over 400 different ways of coping have been identified, but both emotion regulation and coping share the following elements: they are processes of regulation, they include controlled and purposeful efforts, and they are temporal processes [20, 21]. A distinction to be made, however, between emotion regulation and coping is that the latter refers uniquely to stress. Emotional regulation can occur in non-stressful situations, but coping involves dealing with stress. In this chapter, we examine how Black Americans use emotion regulation and other approaches to cope with race-related stress.

1.3 Emotion regulation, coping, and racism

Although stress reactions can vary from person to person, because of the history of Black-White relations in America, African Americans are subject to a unique set of stressors that may influence the way in which they engage in emotion regulation and the coping process. Clark et al. [22] investigated how racism acts as a stressor for African Americans and proposed a model that highlights the biopsychosocial effects; however, they also noted that existing research in this area is insufficient. Moreover, Brondolo et al. [23] conducted a selective review which consisted of identifying individual-level strategies utilized by individuals to cope with interpersonal racism. They also emphasized the lack of research focusing on strategies people can use to cope with racism.

Faced with a dearth of definitive findings on this topic, the main goal of this chapter is to provide a review of the empirical literature, summarize the various ways Black people regulate their emotions and cope when faced with racism, and show how the deployment of these coping mechanisms can vary between men and women, and make recommendations surrounding functional versus dysfunctional approaches inasmuch as they facilitate empowerment.

2. Methods

A wide search for peer-reviewed articles was conducted, based on a search of the following online databases: PubMed, MEDLINE, PsycInfo, Google Scholar, Scholars Portal and Microsoft Academic. A combination of the following search terms was used to obtain relevant articles: "racism", "racial discrimination", "emotion regulation", "coping response", "coping strategies", "Black people" and "Black". Article had to have been written in English or French, peer-reviewed, related to emotion regulation, coping, relevant to racism or discrimination, and the population as Black people (any ethnicity). Additional relevant articles were found through the references section of the articles initially identified. A total of 56 articles from 1996 to 2021 were found after the initial search. Following this, a full-text review was done, and articles that subsequently did not meet the inclusion criteria were removed from the final article count. These tasks were performed by one reviewer. Articles that focused on those under 18 years old were not included. Other reasons that articles were excluded from this review include that the topic was not about coping with racism, or emphasized biological functions such as heart rate. Following the abstract and full-text reviews, 25 articles remained and were utilized to develop the current review. The main themes were identified through analysis of each paper and their findings and afterwards, the coping methods were categorized.

3. Results

One purpose of this study was to identify techniques Black people in racialized environments most commonly use to cope with racism, as explored in the available published literature. In total, 25 relevant articles were identified [24–48]. Of these, 19 studies were quantitative and 6 were qualitative. Most studies reported more than one strategy, with a total yield of 58 coping strategies overall. All were about Black Americans, except one (Black Canadians), and as such the resulting findings most reliably relate to Black American approaches for racism in the US.

3.1 Different types of coping

Although social support and religion were mentioned most often, there is variability when it comes to the other coping mechanisms used. Strategies that were presented for Black Americans included disengagement [27, 35, 36], avoidance [28, 31, 34], rumination [30, 31], direct strategies [37, 43, 45], emotion-focused coping [28, 40], Africultural coping [33, 34], venting [24], and mindfulness [26]. The full list can be found in **Table 1**, which presents an overview of the coping strategies described in the articles reviewed.

We found that the choice of strategies varies depending on the type of racist experience that occurs. The three different types of racism that were recognized in the studies in this review are institutional, cultural, and interpersonal (or individual) as shown in **Figure 1**. Four of the 25 articles highlighted differences in the responses to one or all three of the types of racism. Relating to institutional racism, a combination of different strategies were used: problem-solving [33] and active strategies [47]. When facing cultural racism, collective coping, problem-solving and social support were utilized [46].

For interpersonal racism, spiritual-centered coping strategies were specifically emphasized. Moreover, a few articles identified gender differences within responses to different forms of racism. In regards to interpersonal or individual racism, African American women prefer using avoidance strategies [46]. Lewis-Coles and Constantine [34] found that for institutional racism, African American women tend to utilize cognitive-emotional debriefing, spiritual-centered strategies, and collective coping strategies. For cultural racism, African American men preferred collective coping strategies, which refer to social support from friends, family and community members [34].

<p>Avoidance (3)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disengagement (3), Not responding (1) Africultural coping (2) • Cognitive-emotional debriefing (2), Collective coping (1) Active coping (4) • Working harder (1), Active anger (1), Physical activity (1) Direct strategies (3) • Speaking out (1), Confrontation (1), Educating White people (2) 	<p>Rumination (2)</p> <p>Problem-focused coping (4)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social support (7), Problem-solving (1), Planning (2), Instrumental support (1) Emotion-focused coping (2) • Positive reframing (1), Mindfulness (1), Venting (1), Self-blame (1), Processing the event (1), Religion/ Spirituality (5), Acceptance (1) Substance Use (2) Humor (1)
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Note: Many of the coping strategies identified are a part of a larger coping category. These subcategories are found underneath the main coping mechanism. The numbers in parentheses represents the number of papers that mentioned the specific coping strategy.

Table 1.

List of coping strategies used by black people when responding to racism.

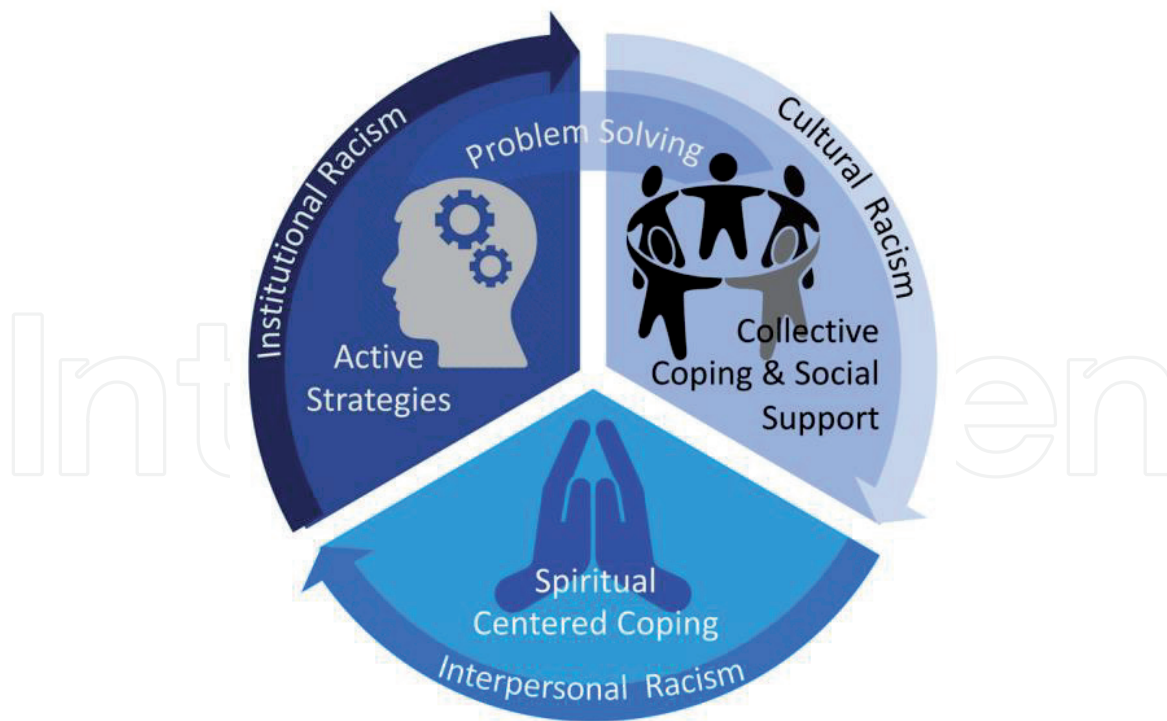


Figure 1. Coping strategies model. The major categories of racism are depicted as a linked circle. Strategies used by black individuals are utilized preferentially in a specific way to cope with each of the three identified types of racism.

Although the identified articles demonstrate how universal many coping mechanisms are for Black Americans, there was little discussion on their efficacy as tools to combat racial stress and trauma. Understanding that different forms of coping are habitually used for specific types of stressors could be useful for designing experiments which can inform researchers about which of these types of responses are most efficacious in which situations. This knowledge can then be used to better support interventions to address racial trauma.

3.2 Similarities across genders

Many similarities were found when examining the literature on coping in Black people. Most researchers found that Black Americans use a variety of strategies to respond to racism [24, 25, 28, 31–34, 36, 37, 43, 44, 46, 47]. Although these papers do not mention the same list of strategies, it is important to consider trends that reoccur within the articles when they are examined in detail. Multiple studies show that Black Americans use social support, religion, and problem-focused coping to respond to experiences of racism. Seven studies described social support mechanisms [29, 33, 34, 36, 42, 46, 47], five studies discussed religion [24, 27, 33, 34, 36], and four described problem-focused coping [27, 28, 33, 40]. In addition, there were similar interpretations of the efficacy and utilizations of these strategies. For example, social support referred to talking with friends, family and/or support groups such as alcoholics anonymous. Religion involved prayer, going to church, and spirituality. Whereas problem-focused coping describes active efforts an individual will make to directly confront the stressor in order to reduce, eliminate or modify it [49].

3.3 Black women

Many of the studies that were relevant for this review had a focus on the strategies employed specifically by Black American women, and they show prominent

gender differences when examining the broader question of Black people’s responses to racism. For example, Black women were most likely to seek social support as a response to experiencing racism. There were seven articles that demonstrated this behavior [24, 34, 43–47]. The authors in these studies explain that Black women will rely on friends and family to discuss racist the incidents for validation and support [43].

The coping behavior that was next most frequently seen among Black American women was religion or spirituality, noted in five studies [24, 25, 34, 43, 44]. As mentioned above, this response can refer to praying or going to church. For participants in Spates’ (2019) study, for example, religion/spirituality helped Black women to be optimistic despite hardships.

Other types of strategies that were observed in Black women were “overt strategies”, mentioned in three studies [37, 43, 44]. This is an umbrella term that signifies observable behaviors or responses such as confronting or speaking out [50]. In Pittman [37], female faculty depended on assertive actions to respond to classroom racial stressors, for example one Black professor described speaking up for herself after a White student threw paper at her. Similarly, Black women in Spates et al.’s [44] study women used overt strategies such as calling out discriminatory behavior. A participant in Shorter-Gooden’s [43] study actively fought back by filing a complaint against the officer after an experience of police abuse.

Additionally, “covert strategies” were also observed, which are intrapersonal actions unobservable by others [51]. In Spates et al. [44], some of the Black women participants described making an effort to blend in and not stand out to avoid racism by attempting to assimilate. Black American women will often adjust their behaviors and roles to reduce the amount of racialized stress they face [52]. Additionally, avoidance strategies were identified among Black women in four studies [34, 43, 46, 48]. This includes avoiding stressors instead of becoming actively involved with them and also includes minimizing or denying these experiences [53]. The cognitive-emotional debriefing coping style is an avoidance strategy that was identified in one of the studies. This strategy entails forgetting about the situation, minimizing the negative aspects of the situation, or engaging in distracting activities [48]. This study further explains that when more gendered racism is experienced by a Black woman, it will lead to more distress and more engagement in cognitive-emotional debriefing coping [48].

In sum, Black women in America are most likely to use a variety of strategies to cope with racism, the most common being social support and faith-based strategies, which is similar to American Black people in general, along with a combination

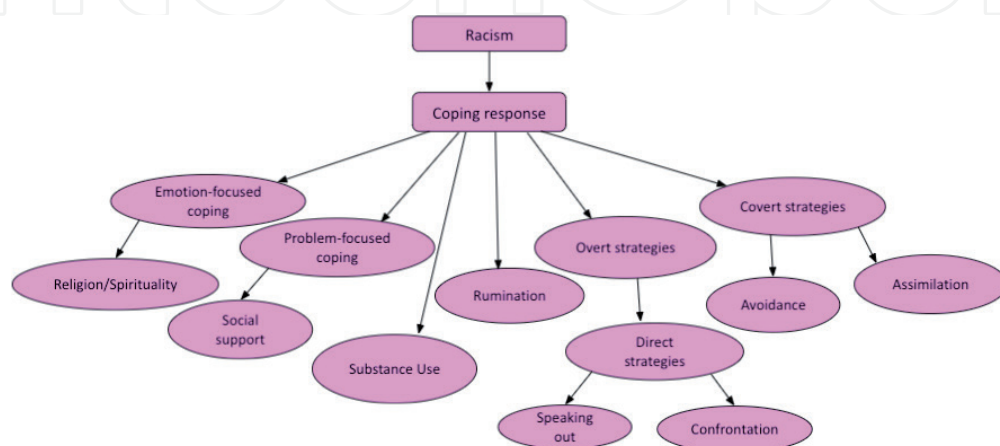


Figure 2. A model of American black Women’s coping responses to racism. Note: The main coping categories are found under ‘coping response’. The specific coping strategies (subcategories) are listed below these.

of overt and covert strategies. **Figure 2** displays all of the coping strategies that are used by Black women when responding to racism based on the findings of the articles in this review.

3.4 Black men

As opposed to the literature detailing the coping mechanisms for African American women, there are no similar tendencies one can draw in the responses to racism for African American men. The findings specific to men were much more diverse. These strategies included seeking social support [32], active anger [38], substance use for instance alcohol and drugs [25, 32], planning [24], religion [32, 34], not responding [45], active coping and acceptance [24]. Consistent with the overall category of African Americans, for Black men, there seems to be a lack of common consensus on the frequency or efficacy of which responses are most prevalent. Therefore, it is difficult to say with certainty the most common or effective strategy utilized by American Black men to cope with racist incidents. However, as with African American women, African American men will also use a variety of coping strategies when responding to racism. These coping strategies are captured in **Figure 3**.

3.5 Functional versus dysfunctional coping

Some methods of coping with racism are more functional than others. How to define functionality depends on if the goal is to end the distress caused by racist acts or if the goal is to stop more racism from occurring in the future, which may increase distress in the short term but result in greater well-being in the long run. Although stopping distress in the short term may have a more immediate impact on the victim's emotional state, behaviors that will be effective in stopping racism rather than simply coping with it, may also constitute a more altruistic means of coping and contribute to the ultimate goal of eradicating racism and facilitating anti-racist structures.

Coping strategies for racism can be divided into two distinct categories. Emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping, both of which prove valuable in different ways. As exemplified in the study by Plummer and Slane [40], emotion-focused coping (as opposed to problem focused coping) refers to efforts an individual makes to reduce emotional consequences of stressful experiences [49]. Emotion-focused coping methods include mindfulness, positive reframing,

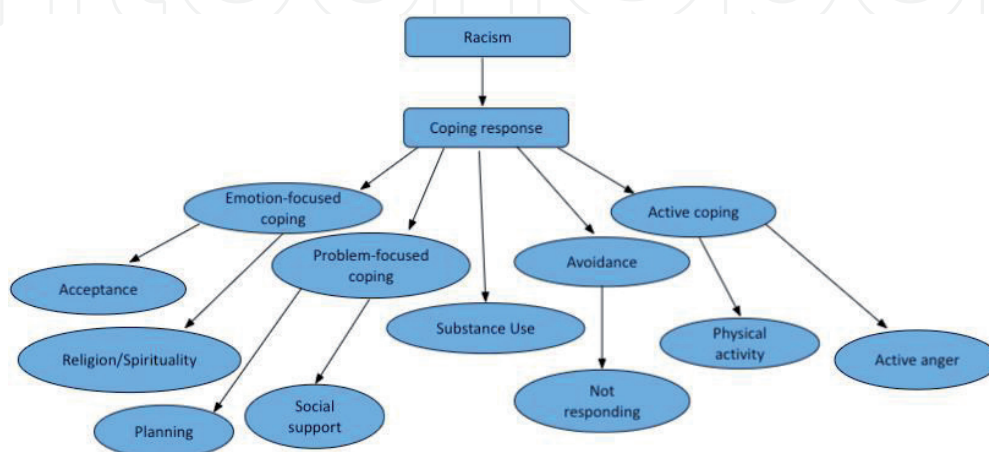


Figure 3. A model of American black Men's coping responses to racism. Note: The main coping categories are found under 'coping response'. The specific coping strategies (subcategories) are listed below these.

venting, acceptance and processing the event. Complementarily, problem-focused coping refers to active efforts an individual will make to directly confront the stressor in order to reduce, eliminate or modify it. Problem-focused coping methods can be harmful or helpful and can include actions as diverse as speaking-out, confrontation or self-blame and substance abuse.

3.5.1 Dysfunctional coping

Despite widespread use, numerous coping strategies, both problem-based and emotion-based, can prove to be harmful to individuals in terms of psychosocial functioning, resulting in further dysfunction in the given individual. Dysfunctional coping approaches include overworking which can cause physical ailments [54, 55], disengagement and rumination which leads to or is a product of depression [56, 57], avoidance strategies which increase anxiety in the long term [58], positive reframing and self-blame which only increases denial and can lead to internalized racism and depression [59] and substance use which can lead to health problems and dependence [22].

3.5.2 Ambiguous coping

Many coping strategies may be helpful or detrimental to individuals depending on how they are used. Positive humor can be an effective form of emotion regulation for negative emotions as it helps facilitate reappraisal. However, negative humor may create too much emotional distance from the experience, and lead to disillusionment and cynicism [60].

Non-responsiveness as another example of an ambiguous coping mechanism can be an essential survival mechanism for Black Americans. By not responding and thereby avoiding escalation, a person can evade negative and potentially dangerous confrontations that can often trigger or even traumatizing (e.g., [61]). However, this type of coping can cause an individual's racial trauma to become internalized which can lead to depression, self-hatred, and repressed anger that may surface in unhealthy and even self-destructive ways.

Confrontation coping can help lead to good outcomes as it allows for agency and can be helpful in eradicating feelings of powerlessness [62]. However, it can become dangerous in cases where confrontation leads to an increased risk of persecution or retaliation from others [63, 64]. Anger is a natural response to being wronged, and it can motivate people to make important changes. But active anger can lead to impulsive actions or words which are violent or emotionally abusive.

Finally, while acceptance and mindfulness may at first glance seem to be positive strategies for coping, because they present a mechanism to accept the emotions elicited by a racist event and reduce distress [26, 65], they can be potentially unhelpful if they result in acceptance of repetitive racist mistreatment and facilitate continued exposure to racism, that can then lead to racial trauma [10, 66].

3.5.3 Functional coping

Several of the coping strategies identified in this review have been found to be beneficial for individuals to help them cope with life stressors in general including for physical pain [67]. Starting with the least active strategy, planning as a response to racism is a method of preparing for the emotional pain of racism by actively strategizing how to cope with a future event. Research has started to demonstrate that the anticipation of a future racial incident might cause people of color to start coping prior to the situation, in order to limit the impacts of this stressor [68, 69].

The act of venting is more active and refers to a primarily verbal action of speaking to oneself or others emotionally about an event which has occurred in the past. This action externalizes the experience and provides an opportunity to process a racist event in a more tangible way than simply thinking or planning around it.

One of the most successful and healthy coping mechanisms used to combat the stress of racism is social support, which is also very effective and more active than venting and planning [70]. Social safety networks and communities of most any kind provide a way to self-express, obtain feedback, take agency, gain validation, and develop resilience. However, most importantly, social networks provide positive affirmation, which is deeply therapeutic in the face of racialized invalidation [71].

Religious practice is the most frequently used and one of the more active coping mechanisms, and as we have seen, among women specifically. Religion can provide a more expansive, firmly rooted perspective on self identity and one's place in the world. Religion also pairs the positive affirmation of identity with the concept of transformative meaning in suffering, such as from racist events. Transformative meaning, a type of positive reframing, is the concept that negative, even traumatic events can be meaningful when understood as a growth and learning experience [72, 73].

3.6 Eliminating racism and empowerment

Many coping strategies that may be personally helpful in the short term may not be effective for eliminating racism in the long term. Real social change will require an investment in strategies that cause racist acts to happen less often and dismantle structural racism. Understanding the source, history and nature of racism in the United States and how it functions is a prerequisite for addressing Black stress related to racism, since it can be difficult to theorize about solutions when the core nature of the problem is unseen or misunderstood. Black people will be best equipped to cope with racism when they understand the nature of racism, feel secure in their identity, and are prepared to address racism as it arises in the moment. As such, strong personal agency can be therapeutic in the face of racism. When a person can a reasoned choice as to how they would like to respond to racism in the moment, it empowers them by providing more control over the discriminatory experiences they face.

Educating others about racism is a type of direct approach that can be an effective coping strategy that can help eliminate racism by reducing the overall level of racism in the community. As people understand how they commit racist acts, this awareness allows them to more easily make antiracist choices.

Empowerment enables people of color to move toward eliminating racism, which will ultimately lead to positive social change as racism becomes less acceptable and society becomes more equitable. Making a meaningful contribution to anti-racist / pro-justice causes around issues of structural racism can be a coping act of agency and self-affirmation [74]. For Black people with racial stress and trauma, healing and helpful coping strategies with benefits to both the individual and the community will result in better outcomes [74, 75] than using other types of coping strategies.

4. Discussion

4.1 Future directions

After completing this review of the literature, it is apparent that there are still gaps in our understanding of the role of emotional regulation and coping as strategies for Black people facing racism. All of the articles in this review are based on

American samples, with the exception of Joseph and Kuo's [33] study focused on Black Canadians. Sex and gender were conflated in this study, since the papers reviewed generally did not report these separately. Additionally, there is a lack of research that concentrates on the responses of Black sexual and gender minorities or those with intersectional identities other than gender. While researching for this paper, very few articles reviewed took into account the unique experience of living with multiple stigmatized identities. For example, the manner in which queer African Americans face racism may differ from approaches used by cis-heterosexual African Americans, and consequently, this would be important to explore and to compare.

Children were not included in this review. As evidenced by our literature search, there does exist some scholarly work focused on African American children's responses to racism which could be of value to understanding racism-related coping across the developmental lifespan. Further, not all online journal databases were utilized for this literature review so it is possible that some relevant articles and findings might be missing from this review and could have been excluded during the article review phases. Lastly, the effectiveness of the coping strategies Black people use to cope with racism was not explored in any study. Future research should examine the efficacy of these responses.

5. Conclusion

Black Americans make use of a variety of coping strategies to respond to racism. These usually include problem-focused coping strategies such as social support and emotion-focused coping strategies like religion/spirituality. Gender differences exist in this response as Black American women tend to prioritize social support as well as religion/spirituality to cope. Also, similarities can be found between how Black Americans cope with physical and emotional stress. As presented in this paper, people typically rely on active strategies when coping with racism, and active strategies mitigate the loss of agency which is a hallmark of racism. Approaches to racism should deemphasize avoidance to synergize with successful coping strategies already being used by the Black community.

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Conflicts of interest

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