

## **Coping (together) with hate: Strategies used by Mexican-origin families in response to racial–ethnic discrimination**

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### **Abstract:**

Coping in the context of racial–ethnic discrimination is often framed as an individualistic process, where the focus is on how the individual deals with the racialized stressor to mitigate its negative effects. However, individuals exist within social contexts including the family and coping processes may operate interdependently as well. Further, racialized stressors have the potential to disrupt the entire family system, regardless of whether the experience in that moment is shared among all its members. Despite these realities, few studies have considered how Latinx youth and their parents may cope together in the face of racial–ethnic discrimination. To address this gap, we analyzed focus group data from Mexican-origin adolescents ( $n = 17$ ;  $M_{\text{age}} = 12.8$ ; 71% girls) and their parents ( $n = 17$ ;  $M_{\text{age}} = 42.8$ ; 82% mothers) to explore the coping strategies used in response to racial–ethnic discrimination. An inductive thematic analysis identified a broad range of coping strategies representing both individualistic and interdependent approaches to deal with racial–ethnic discrimination. Strategies included (a) reframing (with pride) and ignoring an encounter, (b) standing up for oneself, (c) talking issues out, (d) problem-solving together, and (e) protection tactics. These findings provide evidence for the ways in which Mexican-origin families help adolescents cope with racial–ethnic discrimination and offer a glimpse as to how adolescents may help their families cope as well. Future research is needed to further explore the interdependent nature of coping as Latinx family members protect and support one another in the face of pervasive racialized stressors.

**Keywords:** coping | families | adolescents | Mexican-origin | racial–ethnic discrimination

### **Article:**

Latinx youth from immigrant families encounter multiple stressors in the U.S. One particularly salient set of stressors for this population includes experiences related to racial–ethnic discrimination (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2013). Racial–ethnic discriminatory experiences consist of personal and vicarious encounters of unfair treatment related to membership in a minoritized racial–ethnic group (Greene et al., 2006). Further, racialized experiences of xenophobic anti-immigrant and anti-Latinx sentiments, rhetoric, and policies (Barajas-Gonzalez

et al., 2018) are another important source of discrimination in the Latinx community. A recent national report found that 71% of Latinx youth (15–24) witnessed or experienced racial–ethnic discrimination, and 60% of Latinx youth also reported witnessing or experiencing racial–ethnic discrimination due to immigrant status (Jones et al., 2018). These prevalence rates likely reflect the increased racial hostility that Latinx youth experience today, linked to the 2016 U.S. presidential election and Donald Trump’s election campaign (Costello, 2016). Previous research findings provide multiple accounts of the deleterious effects of racial–ethnic discrimination on the well-being of Latinx youth (Benner et al., 2018), including lower academic achievement and increased distress (Huynh & Fuligni, 2010), and increased symptomatology of anxiety and depression over time (Stein et al., 2019).

High prevalence rates of racial–ethnic discrimination and its documented threats to Latinx youth adjustment highlight the urgent need for youth to be equipped with strategies to deal with such a pervasive stressor, especially as efforts to curtail discriminatory incidences remain limited. Indeed, multiple models of minoritized youth development highlight the need for effective coping strategies in response to the insidious stressor that is racial–ethnic discrimination. For example, Coll et al.’s (1996) integrative model identifies such coping strategies as important developmental competencies for youth of racial–ethnic minoritized backgrounds. An emerging body of literature has examined how Latinx youth cope with discrimination, often focusing on what a youth does on their own in response to a personal discriminatory experience (Brittian et al., 2013; McDermott et al., 2019). Although important, this emphasis on individual responses ignores the potential of racial–ethnic discrimination to act as a stressor that may impact multiple members within the youth’s microsystem, particularly the family. That is, racial–ethnic discrimination experiences have the potential to disrupt the entire family system, regardless of whether the experience in that moment is shared among all its members. In the present study, we explore the perspectives and experiences of Mexican-origin adolescents and their parents as they relate to coping in response to racial–ethnic discrimination.

### Coping From an Interdependent Framework

The prevailing framework in the coping literature is an individualistic one (Kuo, 2013), focused on personal agency, strategic and planful actions, and control. For example, the widely cited stress process model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) centers on individual appraisal of a situation or event to determine whether it is a threat to self or neutral. If the situation is deemed threatening, the individual will decide if it can be managed or if one’s affective responses can be regulated to minimize distress. However, there are important differences in the types of stressors, appraisals, resources, and strategies that individuals see as most relevant and useful (Aldwin, 2007; Kuo, 2011; Slavin et al., 1991). Thus, coping approaches that are consistent with individualistic mindsets or perspectives may not represent a good fit for all. An interdependent approach to coping with stressors would rest upon different assumptions and lead to different conclusions (Kuo, 2013). For example, the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2001) frames coping as an effort to ensure the survival of one’s family or group. Even as an individual may go through a coping appraisal, the goal would be a social one (i.e., promote the best outcome for my family or group). Likewise, the cultural transactional theory of stress and coping (Chun et al., 2006) posits that the initial appraisal of a stressor could differ between an individualistic perspective (e.g.,

limits to my autonomy) and an interdependent or collectivist perspective (e.g., social bias against members of my group).

Examples of collective coping strategies include seeking social support from family and coethnic members, behavioral responses guided by collectivistic values like familism and forbearance, and behaviors shaped by religious and/or spiritual beliefs and practices (Kuo, 2013). Similarly, literature on family coping, which is often presented separately from collective coping research, describes six general strategies with the goal of promoting family adjustment: family reframing (e.g., discussing a problem in a positive way), family social support, family spiritual support (e.g., praying together), family problem-solving (e.g., finding a solution to address the stressor), mobilizing support from the community, and family passive appraisal (e.g., resignation from the stressor; McCubbin et al., 1998). As with collective coping, interdependence is inherent to family coping as it emphasizes how family members may work together in response to stressors. For Latinx families, familism values that center on the importance of familial support and family as referents (one's attitudes and behaviors reflect on the family; Knight et al., 2010), as well as the subjugation of self for the family (Steidel & Contreras, 2003) likely dictate not only the interpretation of the stressor, but also the avenues available to combat the stressor as a family.

#### Coping With Racial–Ethnic Discrimination Among Latinx Youth and Their Families

Recognizing the salience of racial–ethnic discrimination as a stressor for Latinx youth, a growing body of literature has investigated Latinx youths' use of coping strategies in the context of racialized stress. In the face of racial–ethnic discrimination, quantitative and qualitative studies have found Latinx youth to employ multiple forms of active, engaged, and disengaged coping (Brittian et al., 2013; Edwards & Romero, 2008; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2008). Youths' use of active and engaged coping consists of individual problem-solving behaviors, positive cognitive reframing, and seeking emotional support, with noted differences in effectiveness by gender (Brittian et al., 2013). Disengaged coping includes an individual's withdrawal from, avoidance, and denial of the stressor. Further, proactive individual coping strategies characterized by working hard and pride were associated with better academic motivation and self-esteem (McDermott et al., 2019). Important to note here is the predominant emphasis on individualistic-oriented engaged and disengaged coping strategies.

Latinx families are often described as operating interdependently with strong family ties, loyalty between family members, and corresponding behaviors reflective of familism values (Hernandez & Bamaca-Colbert, 2016). Ascription to interdependent approaches may lead Latinx youth and their families to use interdependent coping strategies in part due to familism values, especially in the face of a pervasive stressor like racial–ethnic discrimination. Interdependent approaches would dictate family members to consider their individual experiences in the context of their family, especially how behavioral responses may reflect on their family (e.g., how I respond to the stressor may upset my parents). Most importantly, an interdependent-orientation could lead to the provision of multiple forms of support consistent with familism values (e.g., emotional and instrumental; Knight et al., 2010), which could protect against or mitigate stress resulting from discriminatory encounters Latinx youth may face (Park, Du, et al., 2018).

A relatively small body of work has critically considered the interdependent and family-oriented nature of coping among Latinx youth (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Santiago et al., 2016, 2020; Santiago & Wadsworth, 2011 ); however, very few studies have applied this framing in the context of racial–ethnic discrimination (McDermott et al., 2018; Park, Du, et al., 2018). In a study by Park, Du, et al. (2018), family social support served to mitigate the impact of racial/ethnic discrimination on externalizing symptoms for Latinx youth across time, focused primarily on individual experiences of racial–ethnic discrimination with only one item considering racial–ethnic discrimination at the family level. Further, in another study, seeking familial support as a general coping strategy was associated with proactive coping with discrimination in Latinx youth suggesting that these strategies may synergistically reinforce one another ultimately leading to better adaptation (McDermott et al., 2018).

## The Current Study

Although much of past research has framed Latinx youth coping processes in the context of racial–ethnic discrimination as individualistic, we know that youth exist within social contexts—arguably the most salient being the family (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2013). Thus, coping strategies may represent both individualistic and interdependent forms. For clarity, although the terms *interdependent* and *collective* are often used interchangeably, in the current study we focus on the *interdependent* nature of coping strategies rather than the full scope of values and norms that would fit under the umbrella of cultural collectivism. By centering on interdependence, we integrate both collective coping and family coping perspectives to extend the two to the context of racial–ethnic discrimination as experienced by Mexican-origin families. We do this through a qualitative exploration of the perspectives and experiences of both Mexican-origin adolescents and their parents on how adolescents cope when they encounter racial–ethnic discrimination. We also explore parents’ experiences of discrimination along with their reported coping strategies.

## Methods

### Participants and Procedures

Data for this study come from focus group interviews with adolescents and their parents of Mexican-origin conducted as part of the Promoting Dialogues Project. The Promoting Dialogues Project is a mixed method investigation centered on identifying the facilitators and barriers to racial–ethnic socialization processes among four racial–ethnic minoritized groups living in an emerging immigrant destination located in the Southeastern U.S. Focus group interviews with Mexican-origin families were conducted between Summer 2017 and Spring 2018. Families were recruited through multiple community-based organizations, churches, community events, flyers, and social media posts. Parents received US\$30 gift cards and adolescents received US\$15 gift cards for their participation.

Six focus groups were held with Mexican-origin families. Cumulatively, 17 adolescents in grades 6–8 and 17 parents participated. On average, adolescents were 12.82 years old ( $SD = 1.11$ ) and 71% were girls. The average age of parents was 42.82 years ( $SD = 4.66$ ) and 82% were mothers. The majority (76%) of parents completed some high school or higher, almost all (94%) were born in Mexico, and, of those who reported ( $n = 16$ ), almost all (94%) had a household

income below \$40,000. While nativity status for adolescents was not collected, most adolescents in the geographic region are U.S. born. All focus group interviews with adolescents were held separately from the focus group interviews with parents, but were not divided by gender, age, or grade level of participants. All study procedures were approved by the university institutional review board prior to data collection. All focus group interview facilitators were female, bilingual (English/Spanish), and of Mexican descent. Table 1 displays all coping-related questions presented to adolescents and parents. Although interview questions primarily centered on adolescents' experiences of racial–ethnic discrimination, parents often discussed their own experiences as well.

**Table 1.** Related Questions from the Focus Group Interview Guides

Parent version	<p>Have you talked with your children about them being treated differently because they are Mexican?</p> <p>If so, what kinds of things have you talked to them about?</p> <p>Do you give [your children] specific ways to deal or cope with discrimination if it were to happen to them? What advice have you given them?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In school by peers?</li> <li>• In school by teachers/administrators?</li> <li>• In a store/restaurant?</li> <li>• While playing sports or doing an extracurricular activity?</li> <li>• While spending time with friends outside of school?</li> <li>• By police/Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)?</li> <li>• On social media? Exposure to discrimination/racism on TV and social media?</li> </ul>
Adolescent version	<p>Have your parents had conversations with you about people treating you differently because you are Mexican? What kinds of things have they said?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow ups: For example, being called names or teased; being left out; being treated differently by teachers.</li> </ul> <p>How do your parents talk to you about these issues? What kind of things do they tell you?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do they talk about their own experiences being treated differently?</li> <li>• Any experiences where people have treated you differently that led you to talk about it?</li> <li>• Do they talk about current events or the news?</li> <li>• Do they use books or movies or tv shows?</li> <li>• Who brings this up? You or your parents or both?</li> <li>• If your parents don't talk about these issues with you, how does that make you feel?</li> </ul> <p>Have they given you specific ways to deal with discrimination if it were to happen to you? What kinds of advice have they given you?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In school by peers?</li> <li>• In school by teachers/administrators?</li> <li>• In a store/restaurant?</li> <li>• While playing sports or doing an extracurricular activity?</li> <li>• While spending time with friends outside of school?</li> <li>• By police/ICE?</li> <li>• On social media?</li> </ul>

### Data Management and Analysis Procedure

Audio files in English ( $n = 6$ , Mexican-origin adolescent groups) and Spanish ( $n = 6$ , Mexican-origin parent groups) were transcribed in their original language by a team of trained, bilingual (English/Spanish) undergraduate research assistants supervised by the third author. Upon completion, all transcripts were reviewed for accuracy by a different bilingual undergraduate

research assistant. Following an inductive thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), the analytic team coded all transcripts within ATLAS.ti version 8.4, a qualitative data management software. The analytic team consisted of two bilingual (English/Spanish) undergraduate research assistants who served as the main coders (including the fourth author), two graduate students who assisted with data interpretation, and one bilingual (English/Spanish) postdoctoral fellow (first author) who served as the lead analyst and code manager. Adolescents and parents were not matched for analysis due to transcripts being completely anonymized without inclusion of participant identification numbers.

Before coding any of the focus group transcripts, the first author conducted intensive training with the two main coders between September 2018 and October 2018. During this training, the two main coders were taught the basics of open, thematic coding (e.g., how to designate code topics and respective definitions; how to create memos) and how to use the qualitative data management software (ATLAS.ti 8.4 Windows). The main coders then applied this knowledge to a focus group transcript example unrelated to the present study. Once the main coders were comfortable in using the software and demonstrated competency in coding, the entire analytic team read two of the six Mexican-origin adolescent focus group transcripts to become familiarized with the data (Phase 1). Each team member took notes on the two transcripts to help generate preliminary codes to be discussed further as a team (Phase 2). Using these preliminary codes and creating emergent codes, the two main coders proceeded to code all focus group interview transcripts from Mexican-origin families. Throughout this period, the coding team met on a weekly basis to share and compare open codes, discussing all points of agreement and disagreement until consensus was reached. During these meetings, the team went over new codes looking for similarities (e.g., codes with similar definitions but slightly different code names) and differences. The two main coders created memos within the software as they progressed with each transcript. After each team read a new set of transcripts, the code manager merged the two main coders' files and adjusted the codebook based on the team's consensus. The code manager then sent out this newly merged file (i.e., project bundle file) to the two main coders for subsequent coding and adjustments based on the updated codebook. Once the last transcript was coded, using a printed copy of the codebook, coders made suggestions for the merging of any repetitive codes and a clean final version of the codebook was produced. Coders then reviewed all transcripts to carefully compare each transcript against the codebook, ensuring consistency in applying all codes. For the purpose of the current study, the lead analyst also coded this set of transcripts from Mexican-origin families once they were fully coded by the main coders for further interpretive coding based on the current study's objectives (Morse, 2015).

Final codes were then grouped into categories by the lead analyst and these categories were used to identify thematic patterns throughout the data (Phase 3). Additionally, the lead analyst utilized coding memos, query tools, code networks, and co-occurring tables to visualize and verify patterns, aided by ATLAS.ti 8.4 Windows software (Phase 4). Over the course of 8 months, the first two authors met in person and communicated through email to name, define, and refine themes (Phase 5), reviewing printed copies of memos, transcript excerpts, and code networks of coping strategies described by adolescents and parents. The final phase of analysis (Phase 6) consisted of the writing of this manuscript where all authors ensured that the final themes accurately reflected the data and aligned with the study's research objective.

## Trustworthiness of the Data

We gathered information from multiple sources by recruiting adolescents and parents (including fathers) from families of Mexican descent. Acknowledging that different researchers offer different perspectives and interpretation (Armstrong et al., 1997), we enlisted the support of a diverse analytic team where two members were of Mexican-origin background and team members represented a range of academic fields, including psychology (clinical and developmental), health sciences, and counseling education. Rather than aim for complete conformity in coding across team members using only a priori codes, we sought unique interpretation of the data via open coding techniques as coders worked on the same set of transcripts simultaneously. This open coding strategy allowed the analytic team to take full advantage of the diversity of each member’s perspective. In addition, the third author, who was not part of the analytic team, served as an auditor by reviewing identified themes and gathering clarification regarding terms, definitions, and supporting evidence.

## Results

As a precursor to understanding coping in the context of racialized stressors, we attended to the voices of Mexican-origin adolescents and their parents describing both personal and vicarious experiences of racial–ethnic discrimination. For adolescents, personal experiences often occurred at school and were characterized by being bullied by other students due to being Mexican. For parents, disclosed personal experiences took place at work or in a public setting, such as a store, and consisted of being ridiculed and receiving poor service. Vicarious experiences included the ubiquitous sense of “*mucha guerra racial* [lots of racial war]” (as quoted by one parent) hyperinstigated by Donald Trump and his 2016 campaign’s insistent use of racist epithets, his administration’s implementation of anti-immigrant policies, and the amplification of those messages through the media. Throughout all focus groups with adolescents and parents, Trump’s 2016 election campaign and its rhetoric framing Mexican immigrants, their families, and the broader Latinx community as “bad” people (as quoted repeatedly throughout focus groups) consistently emerged as a topic to discuss.

**Table 2.** Summary of Emergent Themes as Coping Strategies

<b>Coping strategy category</b>	<b>Illustrative quote exemplars</b>	<b>Selected related open and in vivo codes</b>
Reframe (with pride) and ignore	“So, I always tell [my children] to not pay attention to [discrimination], don’t pay attention to it because that’s playing the game.” (Mother)	“Don’t let it get to you”; “can’t do anything about it”; ignore discrimination; stay positive
Stand up for yourself	“My back is wet because my parents have worked for this country.” (Daughter as quoted by her mother)	Stand up for yourself; defend yourself
Talk it out	“I felt so offended, so, you know, I talked things out with my parents to calm down.” (Adolescent)	Talk to parents; talk to somebody; conversation with peers
Problem-solving together	“[My mom] was like, just come talk to me and we will talk to the school principal and the vice-principal.” (Adolescent)	Parents take action; tell parents; siblings take action
Protection tactics	“But she worries because when she sees [the news], she thinks it will happen to us. So, I told her not to watch it anymore.” (Mother)	Avoid news; “don’t watch things like that”; protect parents; conceal emotions; don’t talk to protect kids

In response to such racial–ethnic discriminatory encounters, five distinct coping strategies were identified in the course of data analysis. Coping strategies implemented by adolescents and parents ranged in the individualistic-interdependent spectrum. Strategies included (a) reframing (with pride) and ignoring an encounter, (b) standing up for oneself, (c) talking issues out, (d) problem-solving together, and (e) protection tactics. Here, we present the most salient examples of each coping strategy based on participants’ experiences and perspectives in navigating challenging discriminatory encounters. Table 2 presents a summary of coping strategies with illustrative quotes and selected codes. All examples originally in Spanish were translated to English for the purpose of this paper.

### Reframe (With Pride) and Ignore

Both adolescents and parents reported an active use of cognitive reframing paired with the deliberate decision to ignore discriminatory encounters. This strategy was described as a proactive and/or in the moment response and emerged in various examples. Many parents discussed how they encouraged their children to implement this strategy when faced with discriminatory issues at school or online via virtual platforms. One mother stated, “So, I always tell them to not pay attention to it, don’t pay attention to it because that’s playing the game. And for what? I prefer that they avoid it.”

Adolescents recounted similar messages from home. “Remove yourself from the situation,” “don’t listen to them,” “walk away” and “we can’t do anything about it so ignore them” were all common examples of encouraged and actual reframe and ignore strategies as purposeful efforts to avoid “playing the game.” Parents also described how they used this advice for themselves as well when dealing with discriminatory racial encounters.

Among the participating Mexican-origin families in this study, ethnic socialization messages, reflecting family values and beliefs on overcoming adversity, encouraged the use of reframe and ignore strategies. For example, many of these socialization messages emphasized calling on racial–ethnic pride in being Mexican in response to discriminatory racial encounters. One father described how he and his wife responded when their son experienced teasing due to the son’s use of Spanish while at school.

Yes, he [my son] has received comments at school about that. So, we have said to him, “Do not be ashamed that you speak two languages, on the contrary, you should be proud. People can tell you many things, but you should feel sure of who you are and you have the right to express yourself as much as anyone else and be proud of both your American and Mexican culture.”

Turning attributes for which one was bullied into attributes to be proud of were common reframing mechanisms encouraged by parents. Parents often reminded their children about the benefits in knowing a second language, including how bilingualism adds future opportunities.

In addition to racial–ethnic pride, many socialization messages and resulting coping responses centered on faith and beliefs around behavioral expectations (e.g., be strong; be respectful).



Adolescents gave examples of how their mothers would encourage them to “stay positive” and “pray to God and just think that nothing bad will happen.” Likewise, if one were to ever be confronted with a difficult discriminatory situation, mothers described how they taught their children to “always ask God to give them the words to say” so that adolescents would be wise and not act out of anger or haste. One mother gave the following example of how she advised her child to handle a situation in school with a teacher:

I tell them [to think like this], You know, teacher, I wanted to participate but you did not call on me, but that’s okay. Maybe next time you will call on me. There are several children who raise their hand, and, well, no, there isn’t enough time.

Parents provided their children with approaches to cope in response to upsetting events, including reacting appropriately, minimizing the issue, and cognitively restructuring one’s perception. This also included behavioral expectations, such as “always being a respectful person so that people won’t mess with you” and “educating oneself so that others do not see you as a person of low status.” Together, these socialization messages encouraged adolescents to reframe interpretations and actively ignore discriminatory racial encounters as a form of coping, reminding themselves to be “bien educados (well-mannered)” to reflect well on themselves and the family. Although participants chose to reframe and ignore particularly when confronted alone, this strategy was often motivated by an interdependent orientation centered in racial–ethnic pride and familism.

### Stand Up for Yourself

Different from reframing and ignoring, some adolescents and parents described personal accounts of standing up for oneself in response to discriminatory encounters. One mother detailed how her daughter addressed an issue head on when other students used a racial epithet to refer to the adolescent girl and her family:

It happened to my daughter. Two times it happened to her. The first time it happened on the bus and they called her a “wetback.” I asked her, “Did you just sit there quietly?” “No”, she said. “I didn’t keep quiet. I told him that we’re not wetbacks. I was born here.” He said, “but your parents are,” and she replied, “My back is wet because my parents have worked for this country. That’s why their backs are wet.”

This mother then detailed how her daughter did not fully comprehend the meaning of the racial epithet used against her and her family but understood the importance of defending oneself in response. Another mother provided the example of how she stood up for herself at work:

When I started to work at a restaurant there was an American who was very playful, a teenage boy. He would say to me, “Hey, Mexican, bring me this! And hey, Mexican!” and he would start laughing. The first time I let it slide ... but the second time it made me angry, so I said, “Come here” and I say, “My name is not Mexican. I am Mexican, but that is not my name, ok?” You have to talk to them head-on, no messing around.

Addressing the issue “head-on” during the moment proved to be an effective coping strategy for those who implemented it; however, adolescents did note how this strategy was encouraged as a last resort option, particularly “if [the situation] gets physical.”

### Talk It Out

Adolescents and parents identified multiple ways that they looked for and received social support as a source of comfort and refuge from within and outside the family unit to cope with discriminatory events. Outside of the family unit, both parents and adolescents sought support from their peers. For parents, this often meant talking over the phone with a close friend to “vent” or “let off steam” about an event they preferred not to share with their children. Similarly, adolescents reported turning to friends at school for mutual support. Notably, some adolescents preferred to talk about issues related to racial–ethnic discrimination with friends of Mexican descent only (coethnic group members). In addition, some parents cited communal forms of support, including participating in local marches and gathering the support of others online in response to a discriminatory racial encounter.

Within the family unit, talking it out often entailed adolescents talking with their parents about personal discriminatory racial–ethnic encounters after the moment. For example, one adolescent recounted an event that happened at school:

I was taking a test and then after the test we were able to talk. This girl that I didn’t really know well just randomly asked me, “Are you Asian?” and I said, “No” and so she told me, “Oh, then what are you?” and I told her that I was Mexican. She asked where I was from and I said, “Here” and then she said, “Oh, I thought you were Asian because Mexicans aren’t that smart.” You know, I am in honor classes so that’s ... I felt so offended. So, you know, I talked things out with my parents to calm down.

While many adolescents saw their parents as points of refuge, older siblings were also noted as important figures for social support. Like parents, older siblings provided comfort to younger siblings in times of distress related to personal and vicarious experiences of racial–ethnic discrimination. Adolescents cited conversations with older siblings on understanding current events in the U.S. and Mexico and navigating challenging personal encounters, especially in instances where adolescents felt less comfortable talking with parents. Some families actively called on the support of older siblings in response to challenging situations. For example, one mother detailed her family’s strategy with her younger son who often got into trouble for defending his classmates during discriminatory confrontations:

Something I have learned as a mother, older children have more influence over the younger ones than the parents, so when there is a conversation that is proving to be difficult to talk to him or when I feel that he is not understanding me, what I ask of my eldest son is to speak to him. “Talk to him about your experiences, talk to him about how you handled it, and hopefully he gets hold of some of that.”

### Problem-Solving Together

Adolescents and parents provided examples of preparing plans and finding solutions in response to anticipated and experienced discriminatory encounters. In preparation for possible discriminatory racial–ethnic encounters, parents encouraged their children to tell them about the incident as a first step of action. One adolescent reported their mother saying

She was like some people might tell you, ‘Oh, you might have to leave because you’re Mexican’ or something like that. She was like, just come talk to me and we will talk to the school principal and the vice-principal.

Parents were aware of the possible challenges their adolescents could face and set out plans of action. As a family stressor, discriminatory incidents required families to evaluate who could alleviate the issue or which member could best advocate for the one who was victimized. As the above example demonstrates, parents were often designated as ideal advocates. However, older siblings were also noted as active figures in responding to discriminatory experiences. For example, one mother observed an action plan created by her children to comfort a younger sibling who was worried about his parents’ ambiguous future in the U.S. due to legal status:

The only one who more or less worried a little was X, the youngest. But his brothers would tell him, “Don’t worry.” The oldest one said, “No, look, we’re going to stay here. If dad or mom has to go, you will stay with us. And you will continue to go to school.”

In this example, the older brothers worked together to establish a plan and ease the concerns of the youngest sibling that stemmed from uncertainty around legal status and family stability.

Adolescents also advocated on behalf of their parents at times. For example, one mother described how her daughter handled a discriminatory situation at a local store:

The same thing that happened to her [referring to another participant] happened to me in the store. I didn’t complain, but my daughter did. They skipped over me in the first [line], then the second, then they moved me to the third, and when I was going to the fourth, I told my daughter, “Well, if they don’t ring me up, I’ll just leave the items here.” Then the manager [walks by] and I think, maybe I will tell him what’s going on. Then that’s when my daughter says to him, “They moved my mom from here to there.” My daughter said to me, “That’s why you have to speak English so no one will harm you.” ... I left [the store] because I was too embarrassed. I was intimidated faster than [my daughter].

In this case, the daughter who was fluent in English was able to address a discriminatory event in the moment and advocate for her mother who could not fully do so due to language barriers. Similarly, problem-solving responses also involved examples of helping or defending coethnic members during a discriminatory encounter to promote “Hispanic unity.”

### Protection Tactics

In addition to problem-solving together, adolescents and parents described a series of tactics implemented to protect each other’s well-being from uncertainty and distress stemming from discrimination. Protection tactics were diverse, family-oriented, and centered on limiting

discussion of current events related to discriminatory racial–ethnic encounters, concealing emotions, maintaining a positive outlook, and modifying the environment, such as avoiding watching the news. Notably, all tactics were implemented to protect a family member and prevent harm, embodying the idea of putting the other before the self—a characteristic aligned with familism. Adolescents described their efforts to protect the emotional well-being of other family members, particularly their mothers, as an active decision in response to parents’ fears. When asked a follow-up question by a focus group facilitator regarding whether it was difficult to talk about President Donald Trump and his administration’s plans, one adolescent responded

Adolescent: Yes, because I don’t want to hurt my mom’s feelings like- I don’t want to tell her bad news and stuff ... like always keep positive things ... that’s all.

Facilitator: And what would you say to her?

Adolescent: Well, sometimes I won’t tell her and sometimes I will. But sometimes I don’t tell her ‘cause she doesn’t like watching the news because she doesn’t like hearing the bad stuff ...

Adolescents were markedly concerned for their parents and strategically enacted approaches to prevent and mitigate collective harm. Parents also implemented similar tactics to protect their children and curb fear surrounding issues on deportation and racism. These protection tactics included limiting conversations about vicarious forms of discrimination and restricting exposure to news. One mother detailed why she limited her daughter’s time watching the news, saying

So, [my daughter] worries. She says, “Mommy, look at this family and what happened to them.” And well, I try, I advise her to not watch [the news] ... Yes, it affects her, and it makes her worry. But she worries because when she sees it, she thinks that it will happen to us. So, I told her not to watch it anymore.

Racial–ethnic discrimination was consistently framed as an experience that required both individualistic and interdependent strategies among adolescents and parents, whether enacted proactively, in the moment, or after an encounter. Participants engaged in an interdependent orchestration of coping strategies where adolescents, parents, other family members, and sometimes other coethnic group members were mindful of and sensitive to the well-being of one another and acted accordingly to protect the family or group unit, whether it be with a plan of action, advocating for one another, talking things through, or avoiding certain topics collectively.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore how Mexican-origin adolescents and parents cope in the context of racial–ethnic discrimination. To do this, we analyzed responses from focus group interviews with Mexican-origin adolescents and their parents. Both adolescents and their parents called on a diverse set of active coping strategies to deal with, mitigate, prevent, and protect against racial–ethnic discrimination and its residual effects. For the families in this study, racial–ethnic discrimination was often described as a shared threat that mandated the need for family and coethnic members to problem solve together, implement protection tactics, and talk to each other, all with the end goal of preserving the collective well-being. Interdependence emerged as a core characteristic of the coping strategies described by participants.

Our findings from this sample of Mexican-origin adolescents and parents parallel both family coping and collective coping literature and, in turn, depict their many intersections. The diverse use of family/group-oriented responses by study participants highlights the nuanced characterization of interdependent coping, particularly underscoring the multiple hues of social support and problem-solving. Social support seeking (emotional) and problem-solving (instrumental support) in the current study included seeking refuge within the family and co-ethnic community from a hostile external environment, creating an action plan (both proactively and reactively), and learning from trusted others with similar experiences to navigate the unwelcoming system. The idea of family membership and co-ethnic interdependence was embedded in the understanding of both constructs expressed by participants. These findings are important to consider as family problem-solving has been linked to better child mental health longitudinally among Mexican-origin families (Santiago et al., 2020) and previous research has found family support to be beneficial to youth in the context of racial–ethnic discrimination (Brondolo et al., 2009).

Our findings also demonstrate some foundational differences in how Mexican-origin adolescents and parents cope given the dual realities of racial–ethnic discrimination as a pervasive stressor and the goal to protect and sustain the family or co-ethnic group (not just the individual) in the face of such bias. Although strategies identified in the current study are structurally similar to previous coping frameworks, it is critical to note the salience of coping in the context of an uncontrollable stressor like racial–ethnic discrimination. For example, reframing and purposefully ignoring racial–ethnic discrimination may be a wise strategy, not one doomed to fail as it was also accompanied with feelings of pride and behavioral manifestations of familism values (e.g., being *bien educado* and respectful). Avoiding confrontations or withdrawing from conflict fueled by racism and xenophobia can promote basic safety and survival. By the same token, trying to engage in active problem-solving behaviors alone in the face of a pervasive and systemic stressor may not lead to any difference in the environment, so coping energy may be better directed toward that which can be controlled to some extent (Chen & Miller, 2012; Gonzalez et al., 2020) by turning to racial–ethnic pride.

Acts of ignoring or avoiding a stressor and/or acknowledging one’s lack of control over the situation (i.e., resignation) are traditionally housed under disengaged coping or passive appraisal and have been linked to worse functioning over time (Santiago & Wadsworth, 2011); however, participants’ experiences of implementing this response in conjunction with reframing suggest potential benefits for well-being when faced with discrimination. Indeed, our finding of this reframe (with pride) and ignore strategy parallels emerging quantitative work on shift-&-persist processes among low-SES and racial–ethnic minoritized youth where individuals cognitively reappraise an uncontrollable stressor (i.e., *shift*) and look to the future and life in a positive way (i.e., *persist*; Chen & Miller, 2012). In a study of 175 Latinx youth, greater reported use of the shift-and-persist coping strategy served as a protective factor against depressive symptoms for youth who encountered peer discrimination (Christophe et al., 2019). This past finding, paired with participants’ description of the reframe and ignore strategy in the present study, highlights the potential utility of implementing such coping strategies when confronted with uncontrollable stressors. Both strategies, as they are implemented with intention in response to a stressor that is out of one’s hands, are categorically different from classic disengagement, and it is this

distinction that underscores the potential benefit of adapting such strategies in the specific context of racial–ethnic discrimination.

Our findings also support previous literature that documents socialization and its link to Latinx adolescent coping (Doan et al., 2019), underscoring the important role of parents in shaping adolescents' coping strategies. For the families in this study, ethnic cultural socialization was an important precursor to coping responses, in that key cultural values (e.g., faith, family as referents) and the instilment of racial–ethnic pride undergirded coping responses. For example, family members reframed the slings and arrows of discrimination to points of pride (“do not be ashamed that you speak two languages”) to bolster coping via reflection on group strengths and meaning making collectively. The historical literature that has addressed coping from the perspective of majoritized communities does not point to social identities as key to understanding or framing responses (Kuo, 2011), which is an important gap. When coping is framed in an acontextual or individualistic way, the role of cultural group or family membership in appraising or managing stressors goes unrecognized and is decoupled from critical strengths of the group (e.g., racial–ethnic pride).

Additionally, the protection tactics that emerged in this study were specifically employed with significant others in mind, consistent with interdependence and familism values. Adolescents and parents together found ways to avoid being discouraged by news and events that were oppressive to their group and protected each other by limiting that damaging exposure. The idea of forbearance has been introduced in the growing collective coping literature with immigrant participants (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Heppner et al., 2006; Kuo, 2013; Yeh et al., 2006) and was part of the family protection tactics theme in the current study. Both adolescents and parents would at times shoulder the weight of their experiences with discrimination in order not to add to the burden of their family members, consistent with subjugation of self (Steidel & Contreras, 2003). There is no parallel for this in the individualistic coping literature, because it is interdependent by definition; participants framed their coping responses with the best interests of others in mind (Kuo, 2013).

Taken together, the findings from the present study uniquely contribute to the current literature. It brings to the forefront the reality of racial–ethnic discrimination as a stressor for Mexican-origin adolescents that requires the support of multiple individuals within the family and coethnic group to cope effectively. Although, perhaps, personal discriminatory encounters are targeted at one individual (e.g., the adolescent at school), families and coethnic members are affected by these events and there appear to be benefits from working together to overcome and move forward. Contemporary research on family stress and coping predominantly focuses on stressors related to physical and mental illness, marital distress, and economic difficulties (see Price et al., 2010). Less frequently does this research consider racial–ethnic discrimination (James et al., 2018) and even less is this reality considered among non-African American populations (Brondolo et al., 2009). The same can be said of collective coping literature, which is often centered on Asian populations and without emphasis on racialized stressors (Kuo, 2013). Moving forward, family stress and collective coping frameworks must recognize racial–ethnic discrimination as a potential family/group stressor to better understand interdependent coping and inform efficacious intervention efforts at multiple levels (James et al., 2018). In addition, this

work echoes the need for critical conceptualization and measurement of coping specific to racial–ethnic discrimination (Gonzalez et al., 2020).

There are a few limitations to consider in interpreting the findings from the present study. Due to the way focus group interview audio files were transcribed (completely anonymized with no identification numbers listed), our analysis was not able to look within parent–adolescent dyads and triads. Guided by a life course perspective and its linked lives hypothesis (Elder, 1998), previous research has demonstrated the utility in applying a dyadic approach to understand how and why discrimination might impact multiple members within the family system. For example, among a sample of Mexican-origin families, Park, Wang, et al. (2018) found fathers’ discriminatory experiences to worsen youth depressive symptoms who also encountered discrimination. Similarly, a dyadic approach enabled the observation of spillover effects of discrimination on health across family members over time among families from European, Latin American, and Asian backgrounds (Huynh et al., 2019). Indeed, future research, including those using qualitative paradigms, would do well to include a dyadic approach to better capture the bidirectional relations within the family system that may be impacted by racial–ethnic discrimination experiences. As indicative of the interdependent nature of coping strategies employed, participants in this study emphasized their role as child, parent, or sibling within their family, providing multiple perspectives on family-oriented responses to discrimination.

In addition, the main objective of the larger research project from which this data were derived did not explicitly center on coping outside of how parents talked about preparing youth for racial–ethnic discrimination. Thus, participants’ responses were likely limited to the role that parents have in adolescent coping processes rather than the role of other family members, peers, and other coping resources (e.g., spiritual practices). It is possible that both adolescents and parents implement other coping strategies in the face of racial–ethnic discrimination not identified during our analysis. Furthermore, the topic of discrimination and related experiences may be difficult to discuss or put into succinct words, especially in a group setting, and may have benefited from an individual in-depth interview format. Conversely, one might also argue that the focus group format aids in reminding participants about their experiences as others share, particularly if one might not easily remember incidences such as microaggressions. Indeed, previous research has found that individuals often have a difficult time in recognizing personal discriminatory experiences compared to vicarious or group experiences (Taylor et al., 1990). Future research should attend to the intricacies in gathering adolescents’ and adults’ perspectives on personal and vicarious discriminatory experiences, paying attention to developmental appropriateness of questions considering the delicate subject matter.

Our findings are based on a small sample of Mexican-origin adolescents and their immigrant parents living in the southeast U.S. The experiences and strategies reported are neither necessarily representative of all Mexican-origin families nor all Latinx individuals and families who encounter racial–ethnic discrimination. There are likely differences in experiences and strategies used due to region and host reception context (Reitz, 2002), phenotype of individuals (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014) and accompanying racialized legal status that is socially assigned (Asad & Clair, 2018; Getrich, 2013), along with gender (Brittian et al., 2013; Zeiders et al., 2013), generation status (Pérez et al., 2008), language use (Finch et al., 2000), and the potential language gap between parents and adolescents (Boutakidis et al., 2011). Despite these

limitations, the findings from the present study provide preliminary evidence of the interdependent ways in which Mexican-origin adolescents and their parents cope in the face of racial–ethnic discrimination. Specifically, this work shows how adolescents and parents on their own and together actively make decisions to preserve individual and group or family well-being when confronted with toxic racialized stressors. Our work adds to the growing body of scholarly evidence demonstrating the reality of racial–ethnic discrimination experiences for Latinx families, whether from the perspective of undocumented Latina mothers in the northeast U.S. (Rendón García, 2019), Latinx high school students living in the southwest U.S. (Wray-Lake et al., 2018), or Mexican-origin adolescents and parents living in the southeast U.S. from this present study. As the findings from this study indicate, racial–ethnic discrimination is not only encountered as an individual experience but can also reflect a shared family experience that requires a multi-faceted, interdependent response. Future research, practice, and advocacy efforts must broaden their focus to encompass the experience of families and communities, moving away from solely individualistic models of discrimination and coping.

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