

# Comparison of African American College Students' Coping With Racially and Nonracially Stressful Events

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Racial discrimination, a common experience for many African Americans, has been conceptualized within a stress and coping framework. However, few have examined whether racially stressful events are appraised and coped with differently from nonracially stressful events. The present study uses a daily diary method to examine African American college students' appraisals and coping behaviors in racially and nonracially stressful situations. The study examines the following 3 questions: 1) Do African Americans appraise racially stressful events differently from nonracially stressful events? 2) Do they cope with racially stressful events differently from nonracially stressful events? and 3) Do they cope with racially stressful events differently from nonracially stressful events, even after controlling for differences in cognitive appraisals of the events? The present sample consists of 35 participants who reported experiencing at least one racially stressful event and at least one nonracially stressful event during a 20-day diary study. Overall, no differences were found in students' appraisals in the racially stressful versus nonracially stressful events. Participants used less planful problem solving and more confrontive, ruminative, and avoidance coping strategies in the racially stressful events as compared with the nonracially stressful events. These findings suggest a need for race-specific models for coping with racial discrimination.

*Keywords:* racially stressful event, nonracially stressful event, cognitive appraisals, coping

## Racial Discrimination and Its Effects

Racial discrimination is a ubiquitous experience for many African Americans (Essed, 1991; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999). In a large-scale national survey, Kessler and colleagues found that more than 60% of African Americans reported experiencing discrimination at least once in their lifetime and primarily made race-based attributions for the mistreatment (Kessler et al., 1999). Research also suggests that racial discrimination is common among African American college students. Specifically, D'Augelli and Hershberger (1993) reported that 59% of African American students reported having been verbally insulted at least once or twice on their college campus. In addition to being frequent and pervasive, racial discrimination is also costly to African Americans' psychological well-being, physical health, and educational outcomes (Brondolo et al., 2008; Gyll, Matthews, & Bromberger, 2001; Klonoff, Landrine, & Ullman, 1999; Krieger & Sydney, 1996; Neblett, Philip, Cogburn,

& Sellers, 2006; Sellers & Shelton, 2003; Sanders-Thompson, 1996).

One approach to understanding the costs of racial discrimination to the lives of African Americans has been to use a stress and coping framework (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Harrell, 2000; Outlaw, 1993; Scott, 2004; Sellers, Morgan, & Brown, 2001). Conceptualizing racial discrimination within a stress and coping framework has a number of advantages including linking it to a well-established literature and providing possible mechanisms through which racial discrimination can be linked to mental health outcomes. Despite these advantages, conceptualizing racial discrimination within a stress and coping framework begs two fundamental questions: First, do African Americans experience racially stressful situations in the same manner as other nonracially stressful situations? Second, do African Americans cope differently in racially stressful versus nonracially stressful situations? The present study addresses these underexamined research questions.

## Racial Discrimination Within a Stress and Coping Framework

While interpersonal racial discrimination may be blatant or subtle in form (Feagin, 1991; Feagin & Sikes, 1994), research suggests that African Americans report more frequent experiences with covert or subtle acts of interpersonal mistreatment, specifically racial hassles or microaggressions (Harrell, 2000; Kessler et al., 1999; Sellers & Shelton, 2003; Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions are small acts that are often ambiguous, automatic, and unintentional and may be seen as trivial by the perpetrator (Sue et al., 2007). They involve mistreatment for which the causes or

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bases are neither clear nor objectively determined. These forms of discrimination are subject to the interpretation of the individual who experiences the event. Thus, a phenomenological approach that takes the perspective of the victim of the racial microaggression is critical to understanding these and other subtle forms of discrimination (Harrell, 2000).

Consistent with the phenomenological nature of racial hassles and microaggressions, several authors have proposed theoretical models using a stress and coping framework for understanding individuals' experiences with all forms of racial discrimination (Clark et al., 1999; Harrell, 2000; Sellers et al., 2001). Additionally, researchers have applied and modified broad models of stress and coping to their examination of racial discrimination as a stressor (Outlaw, 1993). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) have proposed the most influential model of stress and coping in the field. Within their transactional model of stress and coping, person factors and situational factors interact to influence how individuals appraise and cope with stressful situations. Person factors refer to dispositional qualities (e.g., personality traits, personal history, and identity) that result in interindividual variation in the way individuals appraise and cope with similar events. Situational factors refer to characteristics of the situation (e.g., novelty, chronicity, and duration) that influence the way individuals experience an event. Person and situational factors are hypothesized to have both direct and interactional effects on the individual's phenomenological experience and reaction to a potentially stressful event.

Within their model, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) delineate two processes: cognitive appraisal and coping. Cognitive appraisal is an evaluative process that involves individuals determining whether they have something at stake in the encounter, and if so, to what extent the encounter exceeds their resources to cope. The appraisal is an interpretive process in which an individual assesses whether an event is self-relevant, whether he or she has something to lose, and whether he or she can manage the event. Thus, events are not intrinsically stressful. The appraisal determines whether an individual experiences them as stressful. Individuals who believe they are prepared to manage or cope with the situation will most likely experience it as a challenge. Conversely, individuals who believe they are not prepared to manage the situation will most likely experience it as a threat. The appraisal process along with person and situational characteristics then determine which coping strategies are used.

Coping within the stress and coping framework refers to individuals' cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage a situation that is experienced as a threat (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986). The appraisal process is an important mediating process between situational characteristics of events and coping (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). Smith and Dust (2006) examined the influence of dispositional traits and cognitive appraisals on the coping strategies used by African American college students. They reported that dispositional traits and appraisals of situations (e.g., challenge, threat, and impact on life) predicted students' use of specific coping strategies. Specifically, the degree to which the African American college students viewed the situation as desirable and as a challenge was associated with greater use of cognitive coping strategies. Additionally, viewing the situation as a challenge was predictive of greater use of behavioral coping strategies. These findings provide empirical support for the appraisal-coping relationship theorized by Lazarus

and Folkman (1984). Also, coping has been found to have implications for individuals' psychological and physical health (Taylor & Stanton, 2007). The coping strategies used to manage a stressful event have been posited to affect the duration and magnitude of responses to the event (Clark et al., 1999). As such, an examination of the coping strategies used is important in understanding the consequences that may ensue.

Coping has also been found to be important in the context of racially stressful events (Harrell, 2000; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007; Gaylord-Harden & Cunningham, 2009; Noh, Beiser, Kaspar, Hou, & Rummens, 1999) and may be a mechanism by which racially stressful events impact the well-being of individuals (Harrell, 2000). Furthermore, the coping strategies used to manage racially stressful events may be a source of within-group variability in African Americans' health outcomes (Clark et al., 1999). Certain coping strategies may mitigate the psychological and health consequences associated with racism (Utsey et al., 2000). Several studies have found that race-specific and culturally specific coping strategies directly relate to positive mental health outcomes (Utsey et al., 2007) and serve as a buffer against the negative association between racially stressful events and psychological functioning (Gaylord-Harden & Cunningham, 2009; Noh et al., 1999). Others have reported mixed findings for more general kinds of coping behaviors (Utsey et al., 2000; Scott, 2004; Mellor, 2004). For instance, avoidance coping has been negatively associated with race-related stress (Utsey et al., 2000), whereas the findings regarding social support have been more equivocal (Bron-dolo, ver Halen, Pencille, Beatty, & Contrada, 2009).

### Racial Discrimination: A Distinct Stressor?

While there are several advantages to conceptualizing racial discrimination within a stress and coping framework, it is unclear whether individuals phenomenologically experience (appraise) and cope with racially stressful situations in the same way as other forms of stressors. Elucidating whether racially stressful situations are experienced and coped with differently than nonracial stressors is important in determining whether racial discrimination is a distinct life stressor for African Americans (Banks, Kohn-Wood, and Spencer, 2006). Racial discrimination has been particularly implicated in the Black-White disparities in health outcomes (Clark et al., 1999; Mays, Cochran, & Barnes, 2007). A potential explanation for these disparities is that African Americans experience racially stressful situations more frequently than Whites do and that racially stressful situations are experienced more intensely than nonracially stressful situations (Harrell, 2000).

Lab studies suggest that experiencing racial discrimination may be more detrimental to African Americans than experiencing other stressful events (Bron-dolo, Rieppi, Kelly, & Gerin, 2003). Bron-dolo et al. reviewed six studies comparing the cardiovascular activity of African American participants exposed to racist stimuli to that of African Americans exposed to similarly anger-evoking but nonracist stimuli. Four studies found evidence of elevated heart rate and blood pressure for the individuals who were exposed to the racist stimuli as compared to those who experienced the nonracist stimuli (Anderson, McNeilly, & Myers, 1992; Armstead, Lawler, Gorden, Cross, & Gibbons, 1989; Guyll et al., 2001; McNeilly et al., 1996). The other two studies found no differences in cardiovascular activity across the racist and nonracist stimuli

conditions (Fang & Myers, 2001; Sutherland & Harrell, 1986). In another study examining the impact of witnessing racial discrimination on cognitive processing, Salvatore and Shelton (2007) report that witnessing more ambiguous forms of racial discrimination may be more deleterious to African Americans' cognitive performance than witnessing either more blatant racial discrimination or no racial discrimination at all. While these lab studies provide useful insight into the possibility that African Americans experience racially stressful events differently from nonracially stressful events, there are limitations with respect to the ecological validity of each of these lab studies. Instead of measuring participants' actual experiences with racial discrimination, the studies measure exposure to racist stimuli via video vignettes, guided imaging techniques, or witnessing the result of someone making prejudiced hiring decisions. As a result, it is possible that these studies underestimate the true effect of experiencing racial discrimination as compared to other stressors.

A related issue is whether African Americans use similar coping strategies in racially stressful versus nonracially stressful events. In one of the few studies to examine differences in how individuals cope with different types of stressful events, Plummer and Slane (1996) asked participants to first recall how they coped with a stressful situation they had experienced. Next, participants were asked to recall how they coped with a situation in which they had experienced "racial stress." Plummer and Slane found that the sample used more problem-focused coping and less emotion-focused coping in the racially stressful event as compared with the nonracially stressful event. Although these findings are informative, there are study design issues that limit the definitive conclusions that can be drawn. First, consistent with most of the extant literature on coping, Plummer and Slane used a retrospective approach in which the individuals are asked to both nominate events from their memories and then recall how they coped. Such an approach to measuring coping introduces recall biases with regard to which situations are recalled and which coping strategies and behaviors were used (Todd, Tennen, Carney, Armeli, & Afleck, 2004). Second, there is likely to be significant variation in the amount of time that has passed between the event and the recall of the event both across type of event and between participants. A third limitation is that the study did not examine possible differences in the appraisal process. An individual must appraise an event as stressful before it can be considered to be stressful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). As such, the appraisal process is critical to understanding the experience of racism from a phenomenological perspective (Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Finally, the Plummer and Slane (1996) study did not take into account other situational factors that may have resulted in differences in participants' coping responses in the racially versus nonracially stressful events. Clearly, further research on this issue is needed before any firm conclusions can be made regarding the way in which African Americans cope with racially versus nonracially stressful situations.

### The Present Study

The present study attempts to answer three specific questions: First, do African Americans appraise racially stressful events differently from nonracially stressful events? Second, do African Americans cope differently in racially stressful situations as com-

pared to nonracially stressful situations? Third, are the potential differences in coping accounted for by differences in the ways in which African Americans appraise racially and nonracially stressful events? To address some of the limitations of the extant literature, the present study will use a within-person design in which African American college students have the opportunity to report multiple racially stressful and nonracially stressful events. The study also addresses concerns associated with the ecological validity of lab-based studies by examining events that the students report having *actually* experienced. In addition, the use of a daily diary methodology reduces the possibility of bias as a result of recall. Finally, the present study will statistically control for other situational factors that may account for differences in individuals' appraisals and coping responses in the racially and nonracially stressful events.

Based on findings from previous lab studies of stress and racial discrimination (Brondolo et al., 2003; Salvatore & Shelton, 2007), we predict that African Americans will appraise the racially stressful events as being more stressful than the nonracially stressful situations. Specifically, we expect that African American college students will appraise the racially stressful events as being more taxing, more stressful, and less successfully coped with than the nonracially stressful events. Based on findings from Plummer and Slane (1996), we predict that African American college students will report using more planful problem solving, confrontive, and seeking social support coping strategies as well as less avoidance, internal, and rumination coping strategies in the racially stressful events as compared to the nonracially stressful events. Finally, because cognitive appraisal is viewed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) as an important mediating process between situational characteristics and coping, we predict that differences in cognitive appraisals will account for a significant portion of the differences in coping in the racially stressful events as compared with the nonracially stressful events.

## Method

### Participants and Research Design

Data for the present study was gleaned from a larger longitudinal study of 663 African American college students from three United States universities. The three universities included two large predominately white institutions (PWIs), one in the Midwest and the other from the South, and a medium-size historically Black college/university (HBCU) located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The sample for the present study consists of a subset of participants in the original study who participated in a 20-day daily diary study over a 2-year period. Each year, participants in the larger longitudinal study were asked to participate in both an annual survey of their attitudes, experiences, and well-being as well as one of three different 20-day repeated assessment ministudies. Participants were randomly rotated through the three ministudies through the course of their first three years in the study. The present study focuses only on the participants' responses during a 20-day daily diary study in which participants were asked to report their daily experiences with stressful events, including their appraisals and coping behavior during the event. Because of changes in procedure following the first year of the study, the present study only includes data from years 2 and 3 of

the study. There were 405 participants who were eligible to participate in the daily diary study in years 2 and 3 of which 299 actually participated (response rate of 74%). Of the 299 participants in the daily diary study, 218 (73%) reported experiencing at least one stressful event during the 20-day study ( $M = 2.08$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ , range 1–11), and 70 participants reported experiencing at least one racially stressful event during the 20-day study ( $M = 0.41$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ , range 0–3). To examine within-person differences in the way in which individuals coped with racially versus nonracially stressful events, the present study includes only those individuals who reported experiencing both at least one racially stressful event and at least one nonracially stressful event, a total of 35 individuals (12%).

Thus, the sample for the present study consists of 35 self-identified African American college students (74% female) from the three universities. The current sample includes 28 students from the two PWIs and 7 students from the HBCU. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 21 ( $M$  age = 19.08,  $SD = 0.98$ ), with a mean self-reported family income between \$45,000 and \$65,000. The present sample did not differ significantly from the remaining 264 participants who completed the diary study in years 2 and 3 on a variety of variables. No significant differences were found for gender [ $\chi^2(1, n = 293) = 0.00, p = .57$ ], school [ $\chi^2(1, n = 293) = 2.86, p = .06$ ], household income [ $t(258) = 1.81, p = .07$ ], father's education [ $t(127) = -0.70, p = .48$ ], mother's education [ $t(128) = 0.62, p = .53$ ], or age [ $t(291) = -.38, p = .70$ ]. We also found no differences in participants' attitudes regarding the extent to which being Black is central to the definition of the self [ $t(291) = .29, p = .77$ ] or in how positively they feel about being Black [ $t(291) = .00, p = .99$ ]. The present sample did differ from the larger sample in public regard beliefs [ $t(291) = 2.83, p = .005$ ] such that participants in the present sample ( $M = 3.11, SD = 1.21$ ) reported feeling that other groups view Blacks less positively than the larger sample ( $M = 3.65, SD = 1.05$ ).

## Procedure

The Registrar's office at the two PWIs provided contact information for all students who self-identified as African American. We recruited these students via email and telephone solicitations. At the HBCU, we used campus-wide outreach methods including posting flyers and making classroom announcements. At all universities, the students were informed that we were examining African American college students' daily life experiences. All participants provided written informed consent before participating in the annual survey portion of the study and were compensated with \$15 for participating in the annual survey. Participants completed the annual surveys online individually and in small groups at a designated research or computer lab monitored by research staff.

In compliance with the Institutional Review Boards of the participating institutions, participants also provided informed consent for their participation in the 20-day assessments. Over a 20-day period, participants were asked each evening to complete a brief online survey. Participants were first asked whether they experienced a racially stressful event in the past 24 hours. If they reported that they did experience such an event, they were then asked to describe the event in their own words. Next, their appraisals and coping behavior were assessed. If they reported that

they had not experienced a racially stressful event, they were then asked whether they experienced any other stressful event. If they did experience a nonracially stressful event, participants described the event in their own words and reported on their appraisals and coping behavior. Participants were given \$3 for every daily survey they completed and were offered an opportunity to earn up to \$60 for their participation in the 20-day assessments. The total number of stressful events reported by each participant over the 20-day period ranged from 2 to 9 ( $M = 3.29, SD = 1.53$ ). Participants reported significantly more nonracially stressful events ( $M = 4.23, SD = 2.17$ ) than racially stressful ( $M = 3.51, SD = 1.46$ ) events [ $t(108.99) = 2.08, p < .05$ ]. Examples of racially stressful events include being jokingly called an "Oreo" (which is a term suggesting that an individual is Black on the outside and White on the inside) and entering a store and being ignored by an associate who continued her phone conversation. Examples of the nonracially stressful events include waiting to receive a call-back for an internship interview and feeling overwhelmed by schoolwork.

## Measures

**Person-level or inter-individual measures.** Several person-level variables were assessed during the annual survey including gender, age, year in school, institution, frequency of experiencing racial hassles in the past year, and level of perceived stress.

**Racial hassles.** Participants' normative experiences with racial hassles were assessed using the Daily Life Experiences (DLE) scale (Harrell, 1994). The DLE is a self-report measure that assesses the frequency of 18 racial "microaggressions" in the past year on a six-point scale ( $\alpha = .94$ ). Response categories were "never = 0" to "once a week or more = 5."

**Perceived stress.** Participants' normative level of stress was measured using the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). The scale includes 14 items that assess the degree to which individuals appraise situations in their lives as stressful ( $\alpha = .77$ ). Participants responded to how often they have had specific feelings or thoughts over the past month using a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*). Higher scores were indicative of higher levels of stress.

Participants' gender, age, year in school, and institution were measured as single-item indicators.

### Event-level or intra-individual measures.

**Situational characteristics.** To ensure that differences between racially stressful events and nonracially stressful events were not confounded by other situational factors, each event was coded for situational characteristics that have been identified in the literature as being relevant to stressful events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The situational characteristics include predictability (expected vs. unexpected), controllability (person had control in the situation vs. personal lacked control in the situation), interpersonal nature (someone else was involved vs. someone else was not involved), duration (discreet vs. ongoing), and setting (work/business, place of service, school/school function, street/neighborhood/community/home, other). Three African American males, unaware of the research hypotheses, coded the written descriptions of each event. Two coders independently coded each event. When there was disagreement between the coders, the coders reviewed the events together and reached a consensus. The overall initial agree-

ment across all of the situational codes ranged from 65% to 100%. The interrater reliability for the racially stressful events was 81.82%, whereas the interrater reliability for the nonracially stressful events was 79.72%.

**Dependent Variables**

Participants' cognitive appraisals and coping responses were the primary dependent variables of the present study. These variables were assessed at the level of the event.

**Appraisals.** For each event, participants completed 3 items assessing their cognitive appraisal of the event. Specifically, they appraised how taxing the event was to their resources and ability to cope using a scale of 1 (*not at all taxing*) to 4 (*extremely taxing*). They rated how stressful the event was using a scale of 1 (*not at all stressful*) to 4 (*very stressful*). Finally, they rated how successful they felt they were at coping with the situation using a scale of 1 (*very unsuccessful*) to 4 (*very successful*).

**Coping.** We used items from the Racial Coping Checklist (Harrell, 1994) to assess coping with racially stressful events and items from the Ways of Coping Checklist (Folkman & Lazarus, 1986) to assess coping with nonracially stressful events. In addition, we included three items ("Avoided the people/places involved," "Got into an angry verbal conflict with the person(s) involved," and "Thought about it constantly") for both types of events. Participants rated how much they used each strategy to cope on a scale of 1 (*does not apply*) to 4 (*a lot*). To create equivalent coping scales, the authors matched items from the two checklists based on item content. The items for each subscale are listed in Table 1. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were performed to combine the 13 items into six factors. Based on this six-factor solution, we created subscales

by averaging individuals' scores on the items within each factor. These subscales consist of confrontive coping, in which individuals became involved in a verbal conflict; seeking social support, in which individuals discussed the situation with someone else; planful problem solving, in which individuals took some form of concrete action (other than just discussing the event); avoidance coping, in which individuals pretended the event had not occurred; internal coping, in which individuals imagined an outcome or prayed; and rumination, in which individuals thought about the event constantly and blamed themselves.

**Results**

**Preliminary Analyses**

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the appraisal and coping variables. There were some differences in the correlations for racially and nonracially stressful events. For racially stressful events, how successful participants reported coping was related to the other appraisals and the coping strategies. For nonracially stressful events, how successful participants reported coping was associated with how taxing the event was, confrontive coping, social support seeking, avoidance coping, and rumination. There was also a stronger relationship between avoidance coping and rumination ( $r = .51, p < .001$ ) for the racially stressful events than nonracially stressful events ( $r = .26, p = .04$ ). In general, however, there were stronger relationships between coping strategies for nonracially stressful than racially stressful events.

We did not compute bivariate correlations between person-level and event-level variables. Given the nested nature of the data, the

Table 1  
*Coping Scales for Racially and Nonracially Stressful Events*

	Subscale (alpha)	Nonracially stressful events	Racially stressful events
Problem-focused	Confrontive	Got into an angry verbal conflict with the person(s) involved.	Got into an angry verbal conflict with the person(s) involved.
	Seeking social support (.82)	Talked to someone about how I was feeling. I asked a relative or friend I respected for advice.	Talked to someone close to me about how I felt. Got advice.
	Planful problem solving (.37)	I let my feelings out somehow.	Cried or let my feelings out.
		I changed something about myself.	Changed something about myself to prevent it from happening again (appearance, speech, skills).
Emotion-focused	Avoidance (.65)	I made a plan of action and followed it.	Made a plan of action.
		Talked to someone who could do something concrete about the stressful event.	Made a formal complaint.
		Went on as if nothing happened.	Ignored it, kept on going as if nothing happened.
	Internal (.62)	Avoided the people/places involved.	Avoided the people/places involved.
		Tried to make myself feel better by eating, drinking, smoking, using drugs or medication and so forth.	Did things to get my mind off of it.
		Kept others from knowing how bad things were.	Kept it to myself, didn't tell anyone.
Rumination (.50)	Had fantasies about how things might turn out.	Fantasized about some action or outcome.	
	I prayed.	Prayed about it.	
	Thought about the stressful event constantly.	Thought about it constantly.	
	Criticized or lectured myself.	Blamed myself.	

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Coping and Cognitive Appraisal Variables for Nonracially Stressful Events (Above Diagonal,  $n = 65$ ) and Racially Stressful Events (Below Diagonal,  $n = 46$ )

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Nonracially stressful mean (SD)
1. How taxing		0.45***	-0.28*	0.27*	0.29*	0.19	0.27*	0.17	0.32**	1.54 (0.88)
2. How stressful	0.59***		-0.21 <sup>+</sup>	0.05	0.12	-0.02	0.11	0.19	0.24 <sup>+</sup>	2.20 (0.70)
3. How successful	-0.12	0.12		-0.26*	-0.33***	-0.07	-0.36***	-0.08	-0.42**	1.94 (0.73)
4. Confrontive	0.15	0.28 <sup>+</sup>	0.02		0.44***	0.17	0.52***	-0.04	0.07	0.59 (0.81)
5. Social support	0.27 <sup>+</sup>	0.45**	0.12	0.35*		0.36**	0.63***	0.43***	0.42***	1.42 (0.82)
6. Problem solving	0.15	-0.08	-0.01	0.12	0.25		0.31*	0.26*	0.39**	1.30 (0.62)
7. Avoidance	0.04	0.13	-0.13	0.20	0.05	0.33*		0.25*	0.26*	0.93 (0.53)
8. Internal	0.26 <sup>+</sup>	0.28 <sup>+</sup>	0.07	0.27 <sup>+</sup>	0.58***	0.31 <sup>+</sup>	0.32*		0.41***	1.34 (0.86)
9. Rumination	0.36*	0.25	0.01	0.18	0.36*	0.43**	0.51***	0.53***		1.47 (0.79)
Racially stressful mean (SD)	0.90 (1.03)	0.98 (0.77)	1.88 (1.11)	1.15 (0.80)	1.15 (0.74)	0.85 (0.39)	1.41 (0.59)	1.17 (0.83)	1.24 (0.68)	

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

significance levels would have been unreliable. Instead, we consulted the relationships found in Tables 3 and 4 for insight into how the person-level control variables were associated with the appraisal and coping variables. The person-level variables were not predictive of appraisals or coping.

We examined whether there were significant differences between the racially versus nonracially stressful events with regard to other situational characteristics. Racially stressful events were more likely to be coded as unexpected (93.55% vs. 51.90%) than the nonracially stressful events ( $\chi^2(1, n = 110) = 16.69, p < .001$ ). Racially stressful events were less likely to be coded as controllable (13.33% vs. 63.63%) than nonracially stressful events

( $\chi^2(1, n = 107) = 21.85, p < .001$ ). All of the racially stressful events were coded as interpersonal, whereas only 32.56% of the nonracially stressful events were coded as interpersonal ( $\chi^2(1, n = 118) = 42.44, p < .001$ ). Furthermore, compared with nonracially stressful events, racially stressful events were significantly more likely to occur at places of service (37.50% vs. 5.26%) or in the community (25.00% vs. 12.28%). On the other hand, nonracially stressful events were more likely to have occurred at school (77.19% vs. 21.88%) as compared with racist events ( $\chi^2(4, n = 89) = 32.88, p < .001$ ). Finally, the racially stressful events were more likely to be coded as discreet (96.88% vs. 77.91%) than nonracially stressful events ( $\chi^2(1, n = 118) = 5.96, p = .02$ ).

Table 3

Results From the Hierarchical Linear Model Analysis for Racial Versus Nonracial Event Differences in Appraisals Accounting for Control Variables

	How taxing $\gamma$ (SE)	How stressful $\gamma$ (SE)	How successful $\gamma$ (SE)
Intercept	2.62 (.47)***	2.65 (.61)***	2.00 (.53)**
Gender (female = 2)	-0.48 (.24) <sup>+</sup>	-0.44 (0.24) <sup>+</sup>	0.29 (.26)
Year	-0.28 (.30)	0.23 (.32)	-0.61 (.43)
Institution (HBCU = 1)	0.37 (.18)*	0.34 (.27)	-0.27 (.25)
Freq. of racial hassles	0.01 (.15)	0.16 (.14)	0.15 (.14)
Age	0.23 (.18)	-0.05 (.18)	-0.08 (.20)
Perceived stress	0.18 (.30)	0.07 (.29)	-0.43 (.18)*
No. of events	0.04 (.04)	0.03 (.04)	-0.04 (.03)
Duration	0.39 (.27)	0.41 (.19)*	-0.78 (.24)**
Predictability	-0.36 (.33)	0.10 (.25)	0.08 (.23)
Controllability	-0.20 (.26)	-0.16 (.23)	0.04 (.21)
Interpersonal	-0.22 (.41)	-0.22 (.28)	-0.17 (.21)
Setting: Work	-0.63 (.26)*	0.27 (.30)	1.02 (.32)**
Setting: Place of service	-0.41 (.27)	0.16 (.29)	-0.39 (.32)
Setting: School	-0.13 (.25)	0.06 (.26)	-0.29 (.18)
Setting: Community	0.09 (.33)	0.07 (.31)	-0.16 (.29)
Type of event (Nonracial = 0, Racial = 1)	-0.43 (.28)	-.60 (.35) <sup>+</sup>	0.17 (.23)
Level 2 Variance (SD)	0.02 (.00)	0.21 (.05)*	0.04 (.00)*
Level 1 Variance (SD)	0.82 (.67)	0.69 (.48)	0.67 (.45)

Note. Dummy variables were uncentered and continuous variables were grand-mean centered with the exception of event type. Other is reference category for setting. Fixed effects reported with robust standard errors.

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 4  
Results From the Hierarchical Linear Model Analysis for Racial Versus Nonracial Event Differences in Coping Accounting for Control Variables

	Confrontive γ (SE)	Social support γ (SE)	Problem solving γ (SE)	Avoidance γ (SE)	Internal γ (SE)	Rumination γ (SE)
Intercept	0.57 (.48)	1.44 (.46)**	1.57 (.30)***	1.23 (.36)**	1.31 (.57)*	2.69 (.53)***
Gender (female = 2)	-0.11 (.22)	0.32 (.21)	-0.18 (.14)	-0.19 (.17)	0.20 (.26)	-0.39 (.25)
Year	-0.18 (.34)	-0.61 (.33)	0.14 (.21)	-0.50 (.25) <sup>+</sup>	0.01 (.39)	-0.42 (.37)
Institution (HBCU = 1)	0.26 (.24)	0.25 (.23)	-0.06 (.15)	0.00 (.18)	-0.06 (.28)	0.17 (.28)
Age	0.04 (.18)	0.32 (.17) <sup>+</sup>	-0.18 (.11)	0.16 (.13)	-0.02 (.21)	0.28 (.20)
Perceived stress	-0.12 (.25)	0.13 (.24)	-0.13 (.15)	-0.34 (.19) <sup>+</sup>	-0.53 (.29) <sup>+</sup>	-0.47 (.28)
Freq. of racial hassles	0.03 (.13)	-0.06 (.13)	-0.16 (.08) <sup>+</sup>	0.08 (.10)	0.05 (.15)	0.17 (.14)
No. of events	0.00 (.04)	-0.03 (.04)	0.04 (.03)	0.04 (.04)	-0.07 (.06)	0.03 (.07)
Duration	0.31 (.26)	0.29 (.25)	0.21 (.16)	0.26 (.16)	0.14 (.25)	0.14 (.17)
Predictability	-0.00 (.23)	-0.74 (.22)**	-0.39 (.14)**	-0.09 (.14)	-0.30 (.22)	-0.38 (.14)*
Controllability	0.23 (.24)	-0.02 (.23)	0.02 (.15)	-0.08 (.16)	0.10 (.24)	-0.59 (.16)**
Interpersonal	0.54 (.25)*	-0.11 (.24)	-0.04 (.15)	0.18 (.16)	-0.64* (.24)	-0.63 (.16)***
Setting: Work	-1.41 (.80) <sup>+</sup>	-1.82 (.77)*	0.33 (.49)	0.79 (.51)	0.34 (.79)	0.37 (.51)
Setting: Place of service	-0.04 (.33)	-0.19 (.32)	0.25 (.20)	0.20 (.21)	-0.11 (.33)	0.16 (.22)
Setting: School	-0.18 (.22)	-0.02 (.21)	0.13 (.13)	0.03 (.14)	-0.01 (.21)	-0.06 (.14)
Setting: Community	-0.12 (.32)	-0.16 (.31)	0.21 (.20)	0.00 (.20)	0.33 (.31)	0.07 (.21)
Type of event (Nonracial = 0, Racial = 1)	0.44 (.26) <sup>+</sup>	-0.12 (.25)	-0.56 (.16)***	0.51 (.17)**	0.13 (.26)	0.50 (.17)**
Level 2 variance (SD)	0.00 (.00)	0.00 (.01) <sup>+</sup>	0.00 (.00)	0.05 (.23)***	.14 (.38)**	0.26 (.51)***
Level 1 variance (SD)	0.52 (.72)	0.48 (.69)	0.20 (.44)	0.18 (.43)	.43 (.66)	0.16 (.39)

Note. Other is reference category for setting.  
<sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

We also examined the effects of the various situational characteristics on appraisals and coping. There were few effects of situational characteristics on appraisals. However, individuals did report feeling that events that were ongoing rather than occurring within a discreet period were more stressful ( $B = .41, p = .04$ ) and less successfully coped with ( $B = -0.78, p = .002$ ). Also, events at work compared with other settings were reported as less taxing ( $B = -0.62, p = .02$ ) and more successfully coped with ( $B = 1.02, p = .003$ ). In terms of the coping strategies individuals used in the different situations, participants were more likely to report using seeking social support ( $B = -0.74, p = .001$ ), planful problem solving ( $B = -0.39, p = .008$ ), and rumination for unexpected compared with expected events ( $B = -0.38, p = .01$ ). They also reported using less internal coping ( $B = -0.64, p = .01$ ) and rumination for interpersonal events ( $B = -0.63, p < .001$ ). Finally, participants reported using less seeking social support for events at work compared to other settings ( $B = -1.82, p = .02$ ).

**HLM Analyses**

To examine whether participants appraise racially stressful events differently from nonracially stressful events, three hierarchical linear models (HLM) were estimated for the cognitive appraisal variables using full maximum likelihood estimation in HLM 6.06 (Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2009). HLM accounts for both person-level and event-level sources of variance in the outcomes. At the person level, all three models consisted of the following: participants' gender; age; year in school; institution (HBCU vs. PWI); previous experience with racial hassles; perceived stress; study cohort; and the total number of stressful events reported over the 20 days. The event-level variables included the following: the situational characteristics

(predictability, controllability, interpersonal, setting, and duration) as well as the type of stressful event (racially vs. nonracially stressful). The results are presented in Table 3. Participants did not differ significantly between the racially stressful and nonracially stressful events in their appraisals of how taxing the events were ( $B = -0.43, p = .13$ ), how stressful the events were ( $B = -0.60, p = .09$ ), or how successful they were in coping with the events ( $B = 0.17, p = .48$ ).

A similar set of HLM analyses were used to investigate whether participants coped differently in the racially stressful events as compared with nonracially stressful events (see Table 4). The results indicate significant differences in coping by type of event for planful problem solving, rumination, and avoidance coping. Participants were less likely to use planful problem solving ( $B = -0.56, p = .001$ ) coping strategies in racially stressful events than nonracially stressful events. At the same time, participants were significantly more likely to use rumination ( $B = 0.50, p = .01$ ) and avoidance coping ( $B = 0.51, p = .004$ ) in racially stressful events as compared with nonracially stressful events.

To investigate whether participants coped differently in racially stressful situations as compared with nonracially stressful situations even after accounting for differences in appraisals, we included the appraisal variables as event-level variables in the HLM models presented in Table 4 (see Table 5). The significant effects for type of event remained for planful problem solving ( $B = -0.50, p = .003$ ), rumination ( $B = 0.59, p = .001$ ), and avoidance coping ( $B = 0.59, p = .001$ ) even after accounting for the appraisals. These analyses also yielded a significant effect for event type for confrontive coping ( $B = 0.61, p = .02$ ). After accounting for the appraisals, participants reported using more confrontive coping in the racially stressful events as compared with the nonracially stressful events.

Table 5

Results From the Hierarchical Linear Model Analysis for Racial Versus Nonracial Event Differences in Coping Accounting for Control Variables and Appraisals

	Confrontive $\gamma$ (SE)	Social support $\gamma$ (SE)	Problem solving $\gamma$ (SE)	Avoidance $\gamma$ (SE)	Internal $\gamma$ (SE)	Rumination $\gamma$ (SE)
Intercept	0.50 (.47)	1.05 (.44)*	1.34 (.30)***	0.94 (.36)	0.85 (.56)	2.54 (.52)***
Gender (female = 2)	0.05 (.21)	0.52 (.20)*	-0.11 (.13)	-0.08 (.17)	0.40 (.26)	-0.27 (.25)
Year	-0.51 (.33)	-0.75 (.31)*	0.21 (.21)	-0.48 (.25) <sup>+</sup>	0.00 (.38)	-0.50 (.36)
Institution (HBCU = 1)	0.10 (.22)	0.08 (.21)	-0.11 (.14)	-0.05 (.18)	-0.17 (.27)	0.05 (.27)
Age	0.03 (.17)	0.31 (.16) <sup>+</sup>	-0.21 (.11) <sup>+</sup>	0.14 (.13)	-0.04 (.20)	0.24 (.19)
Perceived stress	-0.42 (.25)	0.00 (.23)	-0.14 (.16)	-0.33 (.19) <sup>+</sup>	-0.54 (.29) <sup>+</sup>	-0.58 (.27)*
Freq. of racial hassles	0.10 (.13)	-0.08 (.12)	-0.18 (.08)*	0.05 (.10)	0.00 (.15)	0.19 (.13)
No. of events	-0.03 (.04)	-0.04 (.04)	0.04 (.03)	0.04 (.04)	-0.08 (.06)	0.00 (.07)
How taxing	0.05 (.10)	0.12 (.10)	0.16 (.07)*	0.15 (.07)*	0.14 (.10)	0.14 (.07)*
How stressful	0.14 (.11)	0.32 (.11)**	0.01 (.07)	0.09 (.08)	0.27 (.11)*	0.03 (.08)
How successful	-0.38 (.12)***	-0.09 (.11)	0.06 (.08)	0.00 (.08)	0.02 (.12)	-0.13 (.08)
Duration	-0.07 (.26)	0.03 (.24)	0.19 (.17)	0.16 (.17)	-0.01 (.26)	-0.04 (.17)
Predictability	0.05 (.21)	-0.70 (.21)***	-0.33 (.14)*	-0.05 (.14)	-0.29 (.21)	-0.32 (.14)*
Controllability	0.29 (.23)	0.06 (.21)	0.05 (.15)	-0.02 (.15)	0.19 (.23)	-0.53 (.15)**
Interpersonal	0.52 (.23)*	-0.03 (.22)	0.01 (.15)	0.23 (.15)	-0.54 (.23)*	-0.68 (.15)***
Setting: Work	-1.22 (.74)	-1.85 (.70)*	0.35 (.48)	0.74 (.48)	0.18 (.74)	0.41 (.47)
Setting: Place of service	-0.23 (.32)	-0.24 (.30)	0.34 (.20)	0.26 (.21)	-0.08 (.32)	0.18 (.21)
Setting: School	-0.31 (.20)	-0.05 (.19)	0.16 (.13)	0.04 (.13)	0.00 (.20)	-0.10 (.13)
Setting: Community	-0.13 (.30)	-0.19 (.28)	0.21 (.19)	-0.05 (.19)	0.29 (.30)	0.12 (.19)
Type of event (Nonracial = 0, Racial = 1)	0.61 (.25)*	0.14 (.23)	-0.50 (.16)**	0.59 (.16)**	0.30 (.25)	0.59 (.17)**
Level 2 variance (SD)	0.00 (.01)	0.00 (.02)*	0.00 (.01)	0.06 (.25)***	0.13 (.36)***	0.25 (.50)***
Level 1 variance (SD)	0.44 (.66)	0.40 (.63)	0.18 (.43)	0.15 (.39)	0.38 (.61)	0.13 (.36)

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

The objectives of the present study were to investigate whether African American college students differed in the way in which they cognitively appraised and coped with racially stressful events as compared with nonracially stressful events. The present study used a daily diary methodology to collect actual stressful events that African American college students experienced in their everyday lives. Based on previous findings from lab studies within the extant literature (e.g., Brondolo et al., 2003; Salvatore & Shelton, 2007), we hypothesized that our sample of African American college students would appraise the racially stressful events as being more taxing, more stressful, and less successfully coped with than the nonracially stressful events. Contrary to our hypothesis, the results of the present study indicated that participants did not differ with regard to how they appraised the events.

A possible explanation for the lack of differences in appraisals is that many African Americans may be somewhat protected against appraising racial discrimination as being particularly stressful by their generalized beliefs about the ubiquity of racial discrimination (Feagin, 1991). Believing that racial discrimination is a prevalent factor in the daily lives of African Americans may result in a heightened sense of racial vigilance, which may serve as a protective factor against the deleterious consequences of experiencing racial discrimination (Crocker & Major, 1989; Major et al., 2002; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). For example, individuals may attribute the negative treatment to the perpetrator rather than to the self, which may be protective of self-esteem (Crocker & Major, 1989). Another possibility is that racist events may be seen as less novel and thus less threatening, because novel events tend to be experienced as more stressful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Finally,

a sense of vigilance may result in feeling more efficacious about one's ability to cope with the situation, which has also been proposed to result in less stressful appraisals (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Another objective of the present study was to examine whether African American college students coped with racially stressful events differently from nonracially stressful events. Our results indicated significant differences in how participants coped with both types of events, although the nature of these differences were in some cases contrary to what we hypothesized based on previous research (Plummer & Slane, 1996). Specifically, we found that participants reported engaging in significantly less planful problem solving and significantly more avoidance and rumination coping in racially stressful events compared to nonracially stressful events both when controlling for appraisals and when not controlling for appraisals. We also found that participants used more confrontive coping for racially stressful events when controlling for appraisals.

The fact that participants used more of certain strategies may be attributable to differences in the situational characteristics of the racial events compared with the nonracial events. The racially stressful events were more often unexpected and happened within a discreet timeframe. They were also all interpersonal, whereas only about one third of the nonracially stressful events were. Additionally, many of the racially stressful events occurred in places of service. As such, the situations in which the racial events occurred may not have been conducive to a drawn out and deliberate strategy; participants may have felt that pretending the incident did not happen (avoidance) or verbally confronting the perpetrator may have been more productive. An example of an unexpected interpersonal event is being ignored by a clerk at a

store. In such a situation, making a plan or filing a formal complaint may be seen as impractical because the perpetrator is a stranger, has little responsibility to the victim, and is unlikely to be encountered again. Interpersonal forms of racial discrimination may yield fewer opportunities for more contemplative forms of coping responses such as planful problem solving coping and instead pull for more immediate coping responses (Joseph & Kuo, 2009).

While participants were less likely to use planful problem solving for racially stressful situations compared with the nonracially stressful situations, they were more likely to use avoidance and confrontive coping. Both types of coping may be more adaptive for racially stressful events than nonracially stressful events. Using avoidance coping strategies to manage racism could be conducive to self-preservation and well-being by mitigating physical and mental wear and tear in a society where racial discrimination is ubiquitous and inevitable. Researchers report that African American college students engage in more avoidance coping for individual forms of racism, and that this strategy is associated with less race-related stress (Utsey et al., 2000). On the other hand, confronting the perpetrator may be useful for getting the individual to change his or her behavior or motivate others to take action (Brondolo et al., 2009), as well as alleviating the victim's feelings of powerlessness and victimization (Scott, 2004). Such motivations would not necessarily be present in responses to nonracially stressful events. The choice of avoidance or confrontive coping when experiencing a racially stressful event may be dependent on the location, context, and timing of the stressor (Brondolo et al., 2009). Individual difference factors may also interact with context to determine when and for whom avoidance or confrontive coping may be most adaptive. It is interesting to note that for the racially stressful events, avoidance and confrontive coping were not correlated ( $r = .20, ns$ ), which suggests that those participants who did not get into a confrontation in the racially stressful event likely chose to ignore or avoid it. In the nonracially stressful events, avoidance and confrontive coping were moderately correlated ( $r = .52, p < .001$ ).

Our analyses also indicated that participants used significantly more ruminative coping for racially stressful events. This finding suggests that racial discrimination, more so than nonracially stressful events, may involve a ruminative component in which victims repeatedly think about the event while simultaneously experiencing or reexperiencing it. Such a response to experiencing racially stressful situations may place the individual at risk for a variety of negative mental health outcomes, particularly depressive symptoms. Rumination has been found to predict the tendency to become depressed and to remain depressed for extended periods of time (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995; Nolen-Hoeksema & Jackson, 2001). The fact that racially stressful events are more likely to elicit ruminative coping than other types of stressful events suggests that such coping responses may be an important mediating pathway linking individuals' experiences with racial stressors and poorer mental health outcomes.

One potential reason for discrepancies between our present findings and some of our hypotheses is that we based our hypotheses on findings from experiments in which the only difference between the racially stressful event and the nonracially stressful event was whether the stressful event was related to race (e.g., Salvatore & Shelton, 2003). The present study used a quasi-

experimental approach to maximize ecological validity at the cost of experimental control. As a result, the racially stressful and the nonracially stressful events that the participants reported actually differed in many ways. To remedy this problem, we statistically accounted for the influence of these situational characteristics in our examination of differences in individuals' appraisal and coping responses. It is possible that this strategy may not have fully captured the ways in which individual and situational characteristics potentially interact to fundamentally change the way in which individuals experience the events. Nonetheless, we believe that this approach provides an important starting point for answering the question of whether racially stressful events are different from other types of stressful events that African American college students experience in their daily lives.

The findings from the present study provide interesting insight beyond the question of whether individuals differ in their appraisals and coping of racially and nonracially stressful events. For instance, 23% of the participants in the larger diary study reported experiencing at least one racially stressful event during a 20-day period. Extrapolating across one year's time, our study suggests that African American college students experience racism between 18 and 55 days a year. Another interesting finding is that there were few gender differences in the African American college students' appraisals and coping responses to stressful events despite other studies finding such differences (Eaton & Bradley, 2008; Howerton & Van Gundy, 2009; Nolen-Hoeksema & Jackson, 2001; Banks et al., 2006; Utsey et al., 2000). Unfortunately, sample size constraints did not allow us to test whether gender moderated the extent to which students differed across the racial and nonracial events in their appraisals and coping responses.

We encourage future research to build on the present findings. First, future studies should develop research designs that will both maximize ecological validity and provide greater experimental control. In providing greater experimental control, it is also imperative that future studies use within-individual designs that include multiple stressful events. The present study's inclusion of multiple stressful events per person and the use of nested models analytic techniques allowed us to disentangle possible situational effects (within-individual effects) from person-level effects (between-individual effects). Such an approach is critical for an accurate assessment of the interactional and transactional processes that are fundamental to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of stress and coping. Second, although the sample size for the present study was more than adequate for the statistical analyses used, future research should consider using a larger sample to provide greater confidence in the generalizability of the findings.

In conclusion, although African American college students may appraise racially stressful and nonracially stressful events similarly when other situational characteristics are taken into account, they use very different coping strategies in response to the events. This finding suggests that there may be some utility in racial coping models (e.g., Scott, 2004; Utsey et al., 2000). Regardless of whether African Americans' responses to racially stressful events is best conceptualized within a generalized stress and coping framework or a framework specifically focused on racial stress, it is imperative that such a focus recognizes that "coping" is occurring. African Americans are not passive victims with respect to the racial and nonracial stressors that they experience. Rather, they take active, effortful action both to alleviate the situation as well as

to manage the emotional consequences of the event. These effortful coping actions may be the key to understanding the increased health, education, and legal risk that African Americans face as a result of exposure to racial stressors as well as a potential source of resilience and survival.

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