

Racist Events and Ethnic Identity in Low Income, African Americans

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This study was designed to determine the relation between racist events and ethnic identity in a group of 100 low-income African Americans. Findings indicated that the more racist events one experienced, the more ethnic behaviors they endorsed and the more they had explored the meaning of their ethnic background. In addition, racist events were also indicative of feeling less close to individuals of other ethnic groups. Results suggest that experiencing racist events may contribute to an increased identification with one's own ethnic background and less affiliation with those of other ethnic backgrounds, with the cumulative effect of racist events over one's lifetime contributing the most to this finding.

Historically, there has been a dearth of empirically based studies focused on specific racial/ethnic minority groups (Ponterotto & Casas, 1991). As the American population has become more diverse (U.S. Census Bureau Report, 2000) and psychologists have gained a better appreciation for learning about people from diverse backgrounds (Rowe, Behrens, & Leach, 1995), there has been a burgeoning of research designed to better understand and serve individuals from various racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Racist events and ethnic identity are two constructs that are pertinent to a culturally competent conceptualization of African Americans. Although researchers have examined the impact of racist events (Farrell & Jones, 1988; Feagin, 1991; Jefferson & Caldwell, 2002; Klonoff & Landrine, 1999; Mattis, Hearn, & Jagers, 2002; Moradi & Subich, 2003; Schuman, Singer, Donovan, & Sellitz, 1983; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003; Thompson, 1996; Yinger, 1995) and the development of ethnic identity (Clark & Clark, 1947; Greig, 2003; Houston, 1984; Marsiglia, Kulis, & Hecht, 2001; McMahon & Watts, 2002; Mosley-Howard & Evans, 2000; Paul & Fischer, 1980; Phelps, Tranakos-Howe, Dagley, & Lyn, 2001;

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Phinney & Alipuiira, 1990; White & Burke, 1987; Yancey, Aneshensel, & Driscoll, 2001), many of these investigations have been conducted on college students, adolescents, or middle-class groups, and no studies have addressed the possible link between ethnic identity and racist events for low-income African Americans.

When conducting research on racist events and ethnic identity, it is important first to clarify the distinction between the terms *race* and *ethnicity*, as well as between *racial identity* and *ethnic identity*, terms that often are used interchangeably. Most people assume that race can be accounted for by a physical trait or manifestation. However, within-group variability often exceeds between-group variability (Allen & Adams, 1992; Zuckerman, 1990).

Race is best described as a social construction created with the intention of maintaining social norms, often driven by the dominant social group. Rather than being a term that implies some kind of objective criteria, *race* is a term that perpetuates the norm of between-group disparity and that has been used to perpetuate economic, cultural, ideological, legal, and political systems of inequality (Omi & Winant, 1986). When the concept of race is introduced, a variety of inferences are evoked from the listener, related to the personal subjective meanings of the people who use it (Feagin, 1991; Mays, Coleman, & Jackson, 1996).

Ethnicity refers to the national, regional, or tribal origins of one's ancestors and the customs, traditions, and rituals transmitted across generations (Helms & Cook, 1999). *Ethnic identity* refers to an aspect of self-concept and social identity that derives from one's knowledge of group membership and the value attached to that membership (Tajfel, 1981). How much a person identifies with his or her ethnic group in the United States varies according to immigration history; history of ethnic group segregation, separation, or assimilation; and the cohesiveness, visibility, and density of the group in different regions (Helms & Cook, 1999).

Ongoing research often has failed to differentiate between racial identity and ethnic identity (Rowe et al., 1995). In most cases, how racial identity or ethnic identity is defined has to do with a specific theoretical or empirical model, leading to discussions about which model depicts the identity process most accurately (Phinney, 1990; Utsey, 1998). Racial and ethnic identity also are understood from various conceptual frameworks that are conceptualized from both stage (or status) theories (e.g., Helms', 1990, racial identity model) and models that identify specific elements of identity (e.g., Phinney's, 1992, ethnic identity model). This range of conceptualizations, the lack of agreed upon definitions, and the frequent confusion between ethnic and racial identity make differentiation difficult.

Racial identity is conceptualized as a person's identity as it relates to the dominant group's evaluation of race. It is the effect of between-group

comparisons that is most salient and internalized as identity. Often, it is one's race, in the context of how that race is perceived by one's society, that determines the social conditions one might encounter (Helms & Cook, 1999). Helms' (1990) conceptualization, based on the work of Cross (1971), identifies racial identity as a sense of group or collective identity based on the shared racial experiences of people from the same group. Core components of this identity deal with the social construction of race, as mentioned earlier, and individuals' dissonance between the dominant social group's attributions about a particular race and having to deal with being members of that race themselves. With racial identity, a person moves through stages of self-denigration to stages based on a solid, healthy sense of oneself as a racial being.

In contrast, *ethnic identity* is constructed from a standpoint of within-group differences and similarities. It is that part of a person's self-concept that derives from his or her knowledge of one's membership in a social group, together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership (Tajfel, 1981). Phinney (1990, 1992) incorporated many aspects of ethnic identity as a self-concept into a holistic model that can be used with any ethnic group. These aspects include ethnic self-identification; feelings of ethnic belonging and commitment; sense of shared ethnic values and attitudes; and cultural aspects of ethnicity, such as language, behavior, customs, and one's relationship with individuals from other ethnic groups. Similar to racial identity, there is a shared experience aspect to ethnic identity as well. However, this shared experience is based on the traditions, values, language, behavior, and customs within a particular ethnicity, as opposed to a shared experience based on the between-group disparity created when the dominant social group dictates systems of inequality based on race.

It stands to reason that ethnic identity and racial identity exist simultaneously within individuals. Whether ethnic identity or racial identity is chosen as a study variable will vary, depending on the researcher's theory and goals of the study. Either aspect of identity can be a viable research variable, depending on one's hypotheses. The intersection of racial identity and racism is a logical comparison and has been investigated in prior studies using college students (Jefferson & Caldwell, 2002; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Findings indicated that racial centrality was positively associated with how much discrimination individuals reported. It makes sense that one's experience of racism would correlate with one's racial identity since both are based on shared social constructions between groups. Such recent studies are beginning to outline just how these two constructs are related. However, studies have not yet investigated the relation between racism and ethnic identity, which may provide more information pertaining to the effects of racism on African American identity.

Racism and racist events are negative life events that happen to individuals who are affiliated with a specific group because of their affiliation with and physical likeness to that group (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996). Such racist events range from cross burnings and physical assaults to racial slurs and discriminatory treatment. They can be motivated by a number of factors, such as fear, hatred, or misunderstanding on the part of the aggressor toward the victim. A study by Klonoff and Landrine (1999) indicated that 96% of African Americans reported experiencing racial discrimination in the prior year, 98% at some point in their lives, and 95% found these events to be stressful.

Racist behavior directed toward African Americans has been documented by measuring such behavior objectively (i.e., cross burnings, hate crimes; Ayres & Siegelman, 1995; Farrell & Jones, 1988; Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991; Schuman, Singer, Donovan, & Sellitz, 1983; Yinger, 1995), as well as through more subjective accounts and appraisals (Feagin, 1991; Mays et al., 1996; Phillip, 1998; Sigelman & Welch, 1991; Thompson, 1996; Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997). It has been documented that race-related stress is related to higher reported levels of psychological distress and poor health in African Americans, posing a public health threat (Williams et al., 1997). In this same study, race, more so than socioeconomic status (SES) or education, accounted for the stress-related health problems seen in the African American sample. Overall, research has suggested that it is the perception of racism directed toward African Americans that often results in psychological and health-related consequences (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999).

The goal of the current study is to examine the relation between racist events as measured by the Schedule of Racist Events (SRE) (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996) and ethnic identity as measured by the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) (Phinney, 1992) among low-income African Americans. The purpose of investigating a low-income population is primarily to provide researchers with another subgroup from which to generalize information. A number of studies have used populations of convenience, typically consisting of college students. While these studies have provided a wealth of valuable and useful information, they have not always been generalizable to other subsamples within the target group population (i.e., African Americans in general). For example, lower SES African Americans are exposed to more chronic stressors, including racist events, than are higher SES African Americans, thus compounding the strain on their psychological resources (Feagin, 1991; Williams et al., 1997). It is important to provide empirical data that investigates these subsamples so that researchers and practitioners will be able to extrapolate needed information from appropriate sources.

A second reason for using a low-income sample is that it is believed that these individuals might experience racist events to a greater extent because of their relative sociopolitical position in society. Therefore, the relation

between racist events and ethnic identity could be different in this population versus other populations (e.g., college students). It is hypothesized that participants who report a greater frequency of lifetime and recent racist events, and who appraise these events as being more stressful, will exhibit higher levels of ethnic identity and lower levels of other-group orientation. The rationale for this hypothesis is that such events will elicit a coping style in which individuals experiencing discrimination will come to others similar to themselves for support, and will distance themselves from other groups whose individuals may be the perpetrators of the racist events.

Method

Sample

African American participants ($N = 100$; 50 male, 50 female; age range = 18–64 years; M age = 34.8 years) were recruited from a large, public urban hospital that serves a primarily indigent, minority population. Of these participants, 12% had no high school education, 30% had some high school, 25% had completed high school, 20% had attended some college, and 13% had graduated from college. Of those who did not complete high school, 13% had obtained their GEDs. The sample consisted of 11.2% who were homeless, and 54.5% were unemployed.

The sample was considered to be low income as indicated by their reported monthly income and the fact that they received public health assistance from the government. Reported income was that 11% had a gross monthly income of between \$0 and \$499; 30% were between \$500 and \$999; 36% were between \$1,000 and \$1,999; and 19% had incomes over \$2,000 per month. Four percent of the sample did not report their income.

Initially, 116 people were recruited from medical walk-in clinics, and 16 were excluded for refusal to participate or as a result of cognitive impairment. After informed consent was obtained, participants were read the measures aloud by interviewers who were trained in cultural and socioeconomic diversity issues. The trained interviewers varied in race and ethnicity, but primarily represented African American followed by European American ethnic backgrounds (Black and White racial backgrounds, respectively). Participation was voluntary, and participants were paid \$25 for their time.

Procedure

Measures

Schedule of Racist Events (SRE; Klonoff & Landrine, 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996). The SRE is an 18-item, 6-point Likert scale self-report

measure designed to assess racial discrimination in the lives of African Americans and to provide a measure of culture-specific stress for this population. Participants rate whether a statement has happened to them in the past year (recent racist events subscale), in their lifetime (lifetime racist events subscale), and how stressfully they appraised the events (appraisal of events subscale).

Questions address issues such as being treated unfairly by teachers, doctors, neighbors, or waiters; having been called racist names; or having been unfairly suspected of a wrongdoing. Prior internal consistency coefficients have ranged from .94 to .95 (Klonoff & Landrine, 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996). For the current sample, internal consistency alphas were .91, .93, and .93 for recent racist events, lifetime racist events, and appraisal of racist events, respectively. Prior studies also have indicated strong construct, group differences, concurrent, and convergent validity (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996).

Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Phinney, 1992). The MEIM, which is a 23-item self-report 4-point Likert scale, includes two main factors: ethnic identity and other-group orientation. The ethnic identity factor has three subscales: affirmation and belonging, ethnic identity achievement, and ethnic behaviors.

A sample statement from the affirmation and belonging subscale is "I am happy that I am a member of the group I belong to." The purpose of this subscale is to measure a feeling of belonging to one's ethnic group, a sense of pride, and being happy with one's group membership.

A sample statement from the ethnic identity achievement subscale is "I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means for me." The purpose of this subscale is to measure an aspect of ethnic ego identity or the extent to which one has explored the meaning of one's ethnicity, as well as its history and traditions.

A sample statement from the ethnic behaviors subscale is "I participate in cultural practices of my own group, such as special food, music, or customs." The purpose of this subscale is to measure one's involvement in social activities with members of one's group and participation in cultural traditions.

Finally, a sample statement from the other-group orientation subscale is "I like meeting and getting to know people from ethnic groups other than my own." The purpose of this subscale is to measure one's attitudes toward people from other ethnic groups.

Prior coefficient alphas for the subscales have ranged from .69 to .90. Current coefficient alphas were .69 for affirmation and belonging, .70 for ethnic identity achievement, and .77 for other-group orientation. Internal consistency estimates could not be calculated for the ethnic behaviors subscale because it contains only two items.

Results

A canonical correlation analysis (CCA) using the three types of racist events from the SRE (Klonoff & Landrine, 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996; recent racist events, lifetime racist events, and appraisal of racist events) as predictors of the four subscales of the MEIM (Phinney, 1992; affirmation and belonging, ethnic identity achievement, ethnic behaviors, other-group orientation) was conducted. CCA is a multivariate method with several key advantages: (a) it assumes that these variables lie on a continuum and may have multiple outcomes, with multiple causes and effects; (b) it allows for simultaneous comparisons between multiple predictors and multiple dependent variables; and (c) it is able to look at what variables are correlated, as well as the shared correlations among the variables (Thompson, 1991). Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for the three subscales of the SRE and the four subscales of the MEIM.

A CCA was conducted in order to determine the relation between the subscales of the SRE (Klonoff & Landrine, 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996) and the MEIM (Phinney, 1992). This analysis yielded three functions; however, only the first function yielded an interpretable squared canonical

Table 1

Means for MEIM and SRE

Scale	Males		Females		Total sample	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
MEIM						
Affirmation/belonging	3.52	0.45	3.60	0.43	3.56	0.44
Ethnic behaviors	2.52	0.81	2.50	1.05	2.51	0.93
Ethnic identity achievement	3.17	0.50	3.14	0.50	3.16	0.50
Other-group orientation	3.19	0.61	3.36	0.52	3.20	0.57
SRE						
Recent racist events	34.94	15.60	26.64	8.31	30.79	13.12
Lifetime racist events	46.10	20.42	33.38	12.07	39.74	17.87
Appraisal of racist events	47.80	23.09	36.60	16.77	42.14	20.82

Note. MEIM = Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney, 1992); SRE = Schedule of Racist Events (Klonoff & Landrine, 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996).

correlation (R_c^2) effect size of 30%. The second function explained only 11.9% of the variance, and the third function explained 1.4% of the variance. As a result, these functions were omitted from interpretation. The dimension reduction analysis using Wilks's lambda (λ) as a test criterion yielded a statistically significant effect for a full model that included both functions, $F(12, 241) = 2.95, p = .001$. However, tests of the second and third functions were not statistically significant, $F(6, 184) = 2.01, p = .07$; and $F(2, 93) = 0.63, p = .53$, respectively.

The affirmation and belonging, ethnic identity achievement, and ethnic behaviors subscales of the MEIM (Phinney, 1992) were correlated positively with each other, but negatively with the other-group orientation factor. However, affirmation and belonging was not a strong contributor to the overall model and was not interpreted. The lifetime racist events subscale of the SRE (Klonoff & Landrine, 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996) was the primary predictor of the relation between the three remaining subscales of the MEIM (ethnic behaviors, ethnic identity achievement, other-group orientation).

Of these three subscales, ethnic behaviors had the strongest relation with lifetime racist events. Following this, ethnic identity achievement also was related positively to lifetime racist events, and other-group orientation was related negatively to lifetime racist events. In other words, for the current sample, the more lifetime racist events African Americans experienced, the more ethnic behaviors they engaged in (ethnic behaviors), the more they had explored the ethnic history and traditions of being African American (ethnic identity achievement), and the less connected they felt to people from other ethnic groups (other-group orientation). While lifetime racist events was the strongest predictor of this relationship, both recent racist events and one's appraisal of racist events were predictive of this relationship, but to a lesser extent (see Tables 2 and 3 for a summary of these findings).

Table 2

Dimension Reduction Analysis for Racist Events Predicting Ethnic Identity

Function	Wilks's λ	F	df	Error df	p
1 to 3	.696	2.95	12	241.05	.001
2 to 3	.881	2.01	6	184.00	.067
3 to 3	.987	0.63	2	93.00	.533

Table 3

Canonical Solution for Racist Events Predicting Ethnic Identity

Variable	Function 1		
	Coefficient	r_s	r_s^2
Recent racist events	0.55	-0.66	43.0%
Lifetime racist events	-2.16	-0.84	71.1%
Appraisal of racist events	0.97	-0.48	22.7%
Adequacy			45.6%
R_d			9.6%
r_c^2			21.0%
R_d			6.3%
Adequacy			30.0%
Affirmation and belonging	0.01	-0.33	11.2%
Ethnic identity achievement	-0.51	-0.49	24.1%
Ethnic behaviors	-0.57	-0.78	60.7%
Other-group orientation total	0.67	0.49	24.1%

Note. Coefficient = standardized canonical coefficient; r_s = structure coefficient; r_s^2 = structure coefficient squared or variance explained. An adequacy coefficient indicates how adequately the synthetic scores on a function reproduce the variance in a set of variables. It is the mean of the squared structure coefficients on the variable. A redundancy coefficient (R_d) is equal to the adequacy coefficient times R_c^2 .

Because of conflicting results in the literature on sex differences using the SRE (Klonoff & Landrine, 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996), descriptive discriminant analysis (DDA) was used to examine group (male vs. female) differences on the subscales of the SRE. There was a small to moderate canonical correlation (.362) on the first function, with an effect size of 13.1% and a p value of .004. Standardized discriminant function coefficients and structure coefficients were examined to determine which SRE scales contributed to the group differences.

Lifetime racist events contributed the most to sex differences, accounting for 96.0% of the variance in synthetic discriminant function scores. Recent racist events accounted for 76.2% of the variance, and appraisal of racist events accounted for 52.3% of the variance in synthetic discriminant function scores. These variables are highly correlated, as noted by the amount of shared variance between them. Looking at the mean scores, males scored

notably higher than did females on average on each of the three SRE scales. However, while there was a great deal of variance accounted for, the overall effect size was somewhat low (13.1%). As such, it was decided that it was appropriate to pool men and women together for the overall analyses.

Discussion

For this low-income African American sample, incidence of racism over one's lifetime had the strongest relation with ethnic identity. More specifically, it was highly correlated with a higher engagement in ethnic behaviors and more exploration into African American history and tradition. The experience of racism over one's lifetime was the strongest contributor. In addition, it was correlated negatively with one's feelings of closeness toward people from other ethnic groups. Therefore, it may be that the cumulative effects of racism have the most profound effect on ethnic identity.

Racist events' positive relation to ethnic behaviors and ethnic identity achievement, coupled with its negative relation to other-group orientation, suggests that racist events may contribute to an increased affiliation to one's ethnic background and feelings of alienation from members of other ethnic groups; possibly even more so for those groups identified as the oppressors. In times of racial oppression, relationships with people from a similar ethnic background may be a source of support that solidifies this ethnic identity and bond.

These collective experiences and relationships are strengthened further when discrimination and oppression make it necessary for members of an ethnic group to depend on one another for survival (Helms & Cook, 1999). In addition, racism that conveys disregard, ambivalence, or contempt when experienced repeatedly over time reinforces defensive thinking and a vigilant stance in order to preserve personal dignity and self-respect (Pierce, 1988). Because this cumulative effect promotes an unwaning vigilance, this may further serve to distance African Americans from other ethnic groups for fear of future racial slights.

Alternative explanations have been offered from studies exploring the relation between racist events and racial identity. For example, Jefferson and Caldwell (2002) highlighted the asymmetry hypothesis suggesting that racist acts perpetrated by the strong against the weak will be evaluated more negatively than similar acts perpetrated by the weak against the strong. Other researchers have demonstrated that racial ideology and beliefs about public regard moderate the relationship between perceived discrimination and subsequent distress (Sellers & Shelton, 2003). These alternative explanations indicate that some dimensions of racial identity may influence the

extent to which African Americans perceive acts as being racially discriminatory. Further research should investigate how both racial identity and ethnic identity relate to one's experience of racist events in order to delineate precisely what contributors account for one's experience of racism.

It is important for researchers to be careful in making causal or directional statements based on correlational data analysis. For example, the finding of a negative relation between racist events and other-group orientation can have two interpretations. While one interpretation may be that experiences of racism may serve to distance people of the oppressed group from people of other groups, another interpretation could be that people from oppressed groups are more sensitive to racist events and more likely to interpret events from people of other groups as racist. Certainly one limitation of the current study is that there was no way to accurately count one's actual experiences of racism from an objective stance. Therefore, it is the participant's perception of racist accounts that is measured, rather than an objective accounting.

These perceptions are based on a real sociopolitical and historical context in which both ethnic and racial identity is a part. Multicultural competence resists temptations to blame the victim and is highly aware of social, economic, and political forces that influence and shape client worldviews. The impact of racist events on African Americans definitely constitutes one of several social, economic, and political issues that might impact the worldviews of this population.

Since the current sample is one of low-income economic status, further research should be conducted in order to generalize this effect to African Americans of all socioeconomic levels. Research with people living in large, urban economically disadvantaged communities suggests that such environments often expose African American families to many challenges (Forehand et al., 2000). In low-income, heavily populated environments where supportive resources are often unattainable, racial oppression can compound the daily burden. For example, research has suggested that encountering the stresses associated with a combination of race and low income increases one's vulnerability to mental and physical illness (Williams, Yu, & Jackson, 1997).

The additional inequities and stressors of having a low income may mediate the link between racist events and ethnic identity in African Americans. Further research should investigate ways in which stressors unique to low-income status may influence the development of ethnic identity in African Americans. In addition, future research should investigate how mediator and moderator variables (e.g., self-esteem, psychological well-being) influence the relation between ethnic identity and racist events.

There are a number of limitations of the present study. First, the use of retrospective self-reports may be biased in a number of ways, including memory fallibility, expectancy bias, and social desirability responding. Second, this study was correlational, precluding the determination of causality. Third, these results may not be generalizable to populations other than low-income African Americans. Fourth, a larger, more diverse sample size—such as participants in other low-income areas, rural areas, or regionally diverse areas—may have yielded different or more generalizable results. Fifth, the internal consistency alpha levels for the MEIM (Phinney, 1992), while adequate for analysis, were somewhat low when compared to prior samples. This may have been a function of the low-income sample used for this particular study. Nevertheless, these low internal consistency alphas need to be taken into account when reviewing the current results.

Finally, some scholars may disagree with our conceptual use of the constructs of ethnicity and ethnic identity in this study and may believe that this was actually a study of race and racial identity. While we agree that race was being studied here, it is our view that in this project, race was being studied in the context of racism and racist events, not racial identity. Thus, we were looking at race as it relates to racist events and ethnicity as it relates to ethnic identity. Future research should focus on examining the links between racist events and racial identity in this sample in order that we may develop a more comprehensive conceptualization of the similarities and differences between racial and ethnic identity.

In closing, the results from this study underscore the importance of the construct of ethnic identity within the African American community, particularly within the low-income African American community. Previous research has noted that African Americans score higher on ethnic identity scales than do other minorities, and it is more core to African Americans' construct of identity than other types of identity (Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Phinney & Tarver, 1988). It may be that discrimination, racism, and social disadvantage make this population more likely to have examined this aspect of themselves (Phinney, 1992).

Research has indicated that a positive racial and ethnic identification is related to a stronger sense of purpose and self and an easier acceptance of frustration (Allen & Stukes, 1982). These traits may assist African Americans when they are confronted with racist events (Anderson, 1991). While ethnic identity is a broad concept influenced by multiple factors beyond racial events, the effect of racist events on African Americans may be another piece of the ethnic identity puzzle. Further research is needed to identify how additional aspects of the African American experience contribute to the development of ethnic identity.

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