



# Cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression: Links to racial-ethnic discrimination and adjustment among Latino/a and Asian-heritage college students



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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** We examined whether two key emotion regulation strategies, cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression, moderated the relations between discrimination (i.e., foreigner objectification and general denigration) and adjustment.

**Methods:** Participants were U.S. Latino/a and Asian-heritage college students ( $N = 1,279$ , 67% female, 72% U.S. born) from the Multi-Site University Study of Identity and Culture (MUSIC). Students completed online self-report surveys in 2009.

**Results:** Multi-group path analysis demonstrated that a fully constrained model fit well for both Latino/a and Asian-heritage student data. The results showed that with increasing levels of denigration (but not foreigner objectification), the combination of lower cognitive reappraisal and higher expressive suppression was related to greater depressive symptoms, anxiety, and aggression.

**Conclusions:** Our findings highlight the importance of examining multiple emotion regulation strategies simultaneously—considering what strategies are available to individuals and in what combination they are used—to understand how best to deal with negative emotions resulting from experiencing discrimination.

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Racial and ethnic discrimination, common experiences for ethnic minority college students in the U.S., are associated with both internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Among Latino/as, discrimination has been linked to greater psychological distress, alcohol abuse, suicidal ideation, state and trait anxiety, and likelihood of being clinically depressed (H.-L. Cheng & Mallinckrodt, 2015; Hwang & Goto, 2008; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). Among Asian Americans, discrimination has been linked to lower perceived social competence, social connectedness, self-esteem, and sense of coherence, as well as greater substance abuse, depressive symptoms, and psychological distress (Alvarez, Juang, & Liang, 2006; Hwang & Goto, 2008; Lee, 2005; Ying, Lee, & Tsai, 2000).

Nonetheless, not everyone suffers the same negative consequences or to the same degree. How individuals manage their emotional responses to experiences of discrimination may account for some of the individual variation in health and psychological outcomes. Although focusing solely on individual-level processes is not sufficient to address the harmfulness of discrimination (e.g., we must also dismantle and change discriminatory contexts, Masten, 2014; Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2013), a better understanding of the role of emotion regulation can offer another access point for intervention. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to examine more closely how emotion regulation strategies may either mitigate or exacerbate the negative effects of discrimination for Latino/a and Asian-heritage college students.

### Emotion regulation as moderator of discrimination and adjustment

From a risk and resilience perspective, discrimination is a risk factor that threatens optimal development physically, psychologically, and socially (see meta-analysis by Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). However, individuals vary in how they respond and adapt to risk, depending primarily upon the presence of vulnerability and protective factors. In general, vulnerability factors exacerbate poor responses to risk, whereas protective factors support ameliorative adaptations (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). These vulnerability and protective factors often occur simultaneously and can be found on multiple levels: within the individual, at the family level, and in contexts outside of the family such as school or community (Werner, 1995). For instance, among Asian-heritage adolescents and adults experiencing discrimination, family conflict acted as a vulnerability factor while family support acted as a protective factor (Juang & Alvarez, 2010; Noh & Kaspar, 2003). Thus, individuals who have access to protective factors are more likely to demonstrate more positive adjustment in the presence of a risk factor, compared to those who do not. In our study, we focus on how different emotion regulation strategies may act alternately as protective factors or as vulnerability factors for individuals confronting discrimination.

*Emotion regulation* has been defined as “the extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions, especially their intensive and temporal features to accomplish one’s goals” (Thompson, 1994). The ways in which a person regulates emotions in different stress-inducing situations has important implications for how the situation is experienced and, subsequently, how that experience affects the individual’s mental health and well-being. Experiencing discrimination can be stress-inducing and elicit negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, and resentment (Sue et al., 2007), all of which can have profound effects, both immediate and cumulative, on well-being. There are various means to address the broader consequences of such emotions, but emotion regulation encompasses the proximal processes occurring as the emotion is being internalized and expressed, consciously and unconsciously (Gross & John, 2003; Gross, 2015).

Two strategies have been the primary foci of emotion regulation research: cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression (Gross & John, 2003). *Cognitive reappraisal* refers to re-evaluating the meaning of a given situation to reduce its emotional impact (Gross & John, 2003). When participants in a laboratory study were exposed to anger-inducing scenarios, those who engaged in high levels of reappraisal reported less anger and overall negative emotions, while also showing more adaptive cardiovascular responses, as compared to those who engaged in low levels of reappraisal (Mauss, Cook, Cheng, & Gross, 2007). In a study with Asian American college students, cognitive restructuring, an active re-evaluation strategy similar to cognitive reappraisal, was found to buffer the effects of low (but not high) levels of discrimination on well-being (Yoo & Lee, 2005). Another study found that Latino/a college students in areas with large Latino/a populations reported more favorable psychological functioning in the face of discrimination when using high levels of habitual cognitive reappraisal; the same did not hold, however, for Latino/a students in areas with smaller Latino/a populations (Soto et al., 2012). Collectively, these studies suggest that cognitive reappraisal, even when measured in regard to general (habitual) use and not in direct response to experienced discrimination, may buffer against discrimination’s negative effects, at least under certain conditions. These findings warrant further investigation.

*Expressive suppression*, in contrast to cognitive reappraisal, refers to the inhibiting of an emotional response. Although suppression may help a person to avoid undesirable interpersonal consequences that can follow from expressing negative emotions, suppression has generally been found to be ineffective in reducing the negative emotions themselves. In an experimental study, individuals who were told to suppress their emotions while watching a film meant to induce negative emotions still reported negative feelings despite their efforts to suppress them. Those who were told to use a reappraisal strategy, on the other hand, reported fewer negative feelings (Gross, 1998). Thus, suppressing emotions can create dissonance between what a person is actually feeling and what he or she is outwardly expressing. Over time, this dissonance can lead to more unwanted outcomes, including anxiety and sadness, in addition to the negative emotions already elicited (Gottschalk, 2003). In general, individuals who engage in greater suppression of negative emotions report poorer psychosocial functioning (Gross & John, 2003).

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