



Original article

Racial/Ethnic Discrimination and Mental Health in Mexican-Origin Youths and Their Parents: Testing the “Linked Lives” Hypothesis

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: Using a life course perspective, the present study tested the concept of “linked lives” applied to the problem of not only how racial/ethnic discrimination may be associated with poor mental health for the target of discrimination but also how discrimination may exacerbate the discrimination-distress link for others in the target’s social network—in this case, the family.

Methods: The discrimination-distress link was investigated among 269 Mexican-origin adolescents and their parents both cross-sectionally and longitudinally. It was hypothesized that parents’ discrimination experiences would adversely affect their adolescent children’s mental health via a moderating effect on the target adolescent discrimination-distress link. The converse was also hypothesized for the target parents. Multilevel moderation analyses were conducted to test the moderating effect of parents’ discrimination experiences on the youth discrimination-distress link. We also tested the moderating effect of youths’ discrimination experiences on the parent discrimination-distress link.

Results: Parents’ discrimination experiences significantly moderated the longitudinal association between youths’ discrimination stress appraisals and mental health, such that the *father’s* discrimination experiences *exacerbated* the youth discrimination-depression link. Youths’ discrimination stress appraisals were not a significant moderator of the cross-sectional parent discrimination-mental health association.

Conclusions: Implications of these findings are discussed from a linked lives perspective, highlighting how fathers’ discrimination experiences can adversely affect youths who are coping with discrimination, in terms of their mental health.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

Although the discrimination-distress link is well-documented in the health disparities literature, little is known about how parents’ discrimination experiences affect adolescent adjustment. This study shows that fathers’ discrimination experiences *exacerbate* the discrimination-depression link in their adolescent children. Accounting for “linked lives” is important in addressing mental health disparities.

Although the public health implications of racial/ethnic discrimination have often been investigated in terms of its adverse mental health effects on the target individual [1], much less research has focused on the damage wrought by racial/ethnic discrimination across a social network, such as the family system. According to a life course perspective and particularly the notion of “linked lives,” [2] human lives are interdependent, and the events that impact one individual will have consequences for others in their social environment. In the present study, we apply a life course perspective and specifically the concept of “linked lives” on how racism and discrimination are related to mental health inequities, as theorized by Gee et al. [3]. Emerging studies have demonstrated these kinds of “ripple effects” by showing how racial/ethnic minority parents’ experiences of discrimination are linked to poor mental health and socioemotional outcomes in their children [4–7] (see also evidence of “vicarious discrimination” [8]). For example, parents’ discrimination experiences have been associated with worse parental mental health [4,6,7] or harsh parenting practices [6] and parent-child hostility [7], which are then associated with poor child adjustment. However, none of these prior studies have applied this theoretical perspective to the problem of discrimination in Latino youths and their families. Given the unique cultural context (e.g., acculturation processes and cultural norms) that shape relational dynamics within Latino (specifically Mexican-origin) families [9,10], an empirical test of the linked lives hypothesis in this population is important.

Currently, 17.9 million Latino youths under the age of 18 comprise the largest minority group of youths in the U.S. [11], and they experience striking mental health disparities [12,13]. Racial/ethnic discrimination and its perceived stressfulness [14,15] are significant contributing factors associated with poor mental health [1]. Prior research has estimated that approximately 50% of Latino young adults (ages 18–24 years) report experiencing discrimination [16] and 70% of Latino adults (ages 18–74) in the U.S. have experienced or witnessed discrimination during their lifetime [17]. Before advances can be made to reduce the adverse effects of discrimination on youths’ mental health, it is important to obtain a more holistic understanding of how parents’ discrimination experiences can affect their adolescent children (and vice versa). By doing so, practitioners can identify the proper target for prevention/intervention purposes, and researchers and policy makers can determine the appropriate unit of analysis for future investigation. For example, among minority youths, how do the discrimination experiences of other family members (e.g., parents) affect the target youth? Although prior research has begun to address these types of questions [4–7,18], the focus has been on mediating mechanisms linking parent discrimination to child

mental health; none have taken a moderation approach, in examining interactive effects of discrimination experienced by the target and both parents on the discrimination-mental health link for multiple family members. The current study makes a contribution by testing moderating effects on the discrimination-mental health link in not only the target adolescent but also in mothers and fathers, using a longitudinal design. Moreover, given the call for prioritizing the assessment of the stressfulness of discriminatory experiences in future research [19], the present investigation measured adolescents’ discrimination stress appraisals and the frequency of parents’ everyday discrimination experiences. Thus, the current study addresses these critical but under-researched issues for the first time among Mexican-origin families. The focus on Mexican-origin youths and families is important, given that Mexicans comprise the largest proportion (63.4%) of Latinos in the U.S. [20].

Theoretical framework: Life course perspective

The life course perspective calls for the study of human lives within the context of time, age, and social patterns that affect individual trajectories [2]. One key principle within the life course approach is that of linked lives, which assumes that “lives are lived interdependently, and social and historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships” [2, p. 4]. Applied to the problem of health inequities and research on racism and racial/ethnic discrimination, the concept of linked lives implies that when one person encounters racial/ethnic discrimination, that experience has ripple effects across their social network, such as their family. As a result, discrimination may operate to either weaken or strengthen social ties and social capital [3].

The linked lives principle, as well as the limited empirical research in this area, guided the conceptualization of the present study and the generation of the study hypotheses. Specifically, when Mexican-origin adolescents encounter racial/ethnic discrimination, the linked lives principle would suggest that their discrimination experience would affect not only the target adolescent but also their parents. Conversely, when a Mexican-origin mother or father encounters discrimination, the same principle would suggest that their discrimination experience would affect not only the parent, but also others in their family context, such as their adolescent child. For the purpose of the present study, the linked lives concept was tested through interaction effects in multilevel moderation models. We predicted that parents’ (mother’s and father’s, respectively) discrimination experiences would exacerbate the link between youths’ discrimination stress appraisals and their mental health. Conversely, we predicted that the youth’s discrimination stress appraisals would exacerbate the parent’s discrimination-parent mental health link. These predictions were based on prior empirical research showing that parents’ experiences of discrimination were prospectively associated with distress and negative affect for their child and vice versa [18]. Mental health outcomes were anxiety and depression. These hypotheses were tested both cross-sectionally and longitudinally using a multilevel modeling approach. Age, gender, nativity status, and family income were statistically controlled for in all analyses given prior research indicating variations in reporting discrimination [16,19,21,22] as well as age and gender differences in anxiety [23] and depression [24].

Conflicts of Interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Contributors’ Statement: All authors approved the final manuscript as submitted and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work. Irene J.K. Park, Ph.D., conceived and executed the study and wrote the manuscript. Han Du, M.A., conducted the statistical analyses and aided in the writing of the Data Analytic Strategy and Results sections. Lijuan Wang, Ph.D., aided in the design and supervision of the statistical analyses and in editing the manuscript. David R. Williams, Ph.D., aided in the conceptualization of the study and in editing the manuscript. Margarita Alegría, Ph.D., aided in the conceptualization of the study and in editing the manuscript.

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