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Pathways from Racial Discrimination to Multiple Sexual Partners Among Male African American Adolescents

Steven M. Kogan,
University of Georgia

Tianyi Yu,
University of Georgia

Kimberly A. Allen,
Florida State University

Alexandra M. Pocock, and
Teach for America, Atlanta, Georgia

Gene H. Brody
University of Georgia

Abstract

African American male adolescents' involvement with multiple sexual partners has important implications for public health as well as for their development of ideas regarding masculinity and sexuality. The purpose of this study was to test hypotheses regarding the pathways through which racial discrimination affects African American adolescents' involvement with multiple sexual partners. We hypothesized that racial discrimination would engender psychological distress, which would promote attitudes and peer affiliations conducive to multiple sexual partnerships. The study also examined the protective influence of parenting practices in buffering the influence of contextual stressors. Participants were 221 African American male youth who provided data at ages 16 and 18; their parents provided data on family socioeconomic disadvantages. Of these young men, 18.5% reported having 3 or more sexual partners during the past 3 months. Structural equation models indicated that racial discrimination contributed to sexual activity with multiple partners by inducing psychological distress, which in turn affected attitudes and peer affiliations conducive to multiple partners. The experience of protective parenting, which included racial socialization, closeness and harmony in parent-child relationships, and parental monitoring, buffered the influence of racial discrimination on psychological distress. These findings suggest targets for prevention programming and underscore the importance of efforts to reduce young men's experience with racial discrimination.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Steven M. Kogan, Department of Human Development and Family Science, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30602; telephone 706-542-4899; fax 706-542-4862, smkogan@uga.edu. Steven M. Kogan, Department of Human Development and Family Science, University of Georgia; Tianyi Yu and Gene H. Brody, Center for Family Research, University of Georgia; Kimberly A. Allen, Department of Child and Family Sciences, Florida State University; Alexandra M. Pocock, Teach for America, Atlanta, Georgia.

Keywords

racial discrimination; male; African Americans; multiple sexual partners

During adolescence, an individual's sense of personal efficacy to achieve goals in life and perceptions of the world as fair, equitable, and just are significantly influenced by his or her social experiences and environment. Unfortunately, the social environments of many minority youth include experiences with racial discrimination that have the potential to foster emotional distress and a sense of powerlessness. In turn, these perceptions may influence youth health outcomes and racial/ethnic disparities by promoting psychological distress (e.g., frustration, anger, low sense of personal agency) that can affect health behavior and the development of personal relationships (Sanders-Phillips, Settles-Reaves, Walker, & Brownlow, 2009). An emerging body of empirical research documents the pernicious influence of racial discrimination on adolescent adjustment and health-related behavior, among minority youth in general and African American youth in particular (Mays, Cochran, & Barnes, 2007). Exposure to racial discrimination has been associated with increases in adjustment problems among African American youth, including depressive symptoms, substance use, and externalizing behavior (Brody et al., 2006; Gibbons et al., 2010; Gibbons et al., 2012; Lambert, Herman, Bynum, & Ialongo, 2009). Several recent studies have linked exposure to racial discrimination to African American youth's engagement in sexual risk behaviors involving numbers of sexual partners, condom use, and concurrent substance use and sexual activity (Kogan et al., 2010; Roberts et al., 2011; Stevens-Watkins, Brown-Wright, & Tyler, 2011). Studies also suggest that, compared with African American female youth, racial discrimination may have more profound effects on African American male youth's involvement in risk behaviors such as substance use (Brody, Kogan, & Chen, 2012) and risky sex (Kogan et al., 2010).

In the present study, we investigated the association between male African American adolescents' reported exposure to racial discrimination at age 16 and their involvement with multiple sexual partners at age 19. We focused on youth's having multiple sexual partners for several reasons. Epidemiological surveillance indicates that, compared with other racial/ethnic and gender subgroups, African American adolescent men are more likely to report high numbers of sexual partners (Eaton et al., 2012; Laumann & Youm, 1999). Multiple sexual partnerships pose a significant health threat to young men and to African American communities because they are linked to elevated rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV (Adimora, Schoenbach, & Doherty, 2006). African American youth and young adults experience disproportionately high rates of STIs compared with those in other racial/ethnic groups. Involvement with multiple sexual partners also increases the likelihood that young men will become fathers during adolescence outside of committed relationships (Kogan et al., 2013). From developmental and gender studies perspectives, the pursuit of multiple sexual partners in adolescence may reflect the adoption of a masculine ideal characterized by sexual conquest rather than intimacy (Bowleg, 2004).

Although several studies suggest a link between exposure to racial discrimination and African American adolescents' involvement with multiple sexual partners, this research base

is significantly limited. First, little research has documented prospectively the effects of discrimination specifically with male youth. Well-designed longitudinal studies that can account for multiple confounding factors are required to increase researchers' confidence in identifying discrimination as a risk factor for having multiple sexual partners. Second, given the hypothesized link between exposure to racial discrimination and having multiple sexual partners, little is known about the mechanisms of action responsible for this association. Studies are needed that specify how racial discrimination affects young men in ways that encourage multiple partnerships. Third, male adolescents' development is influenced by multiple risk and protective processes. Discrimination does not influence all young men equally, and the moderators of this effect can provide important clues about protecting young men from discrimination-associated risks. Thus, the present research was designed to test hypotheses regarding risk and protective mechanisms associated with the link between male African American adolescents' exposure to racial discrimination and their involvement with multiple sexual partners.

Figure 1 presents a conceptual model that summarizes specific study hypotheses. This model was informed by Vandello and colleagues' research on "precarious manhood" (Bosson & Vandello, 2011; Bosson, Vandello, Burnaford, Weaver, & Wasti, 2009; Vandello & Bosson, 2013; Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008) and by Anderson's (1989, 1990) research on the mechanisms linking challenging social environments to hypermasculine displays of sexuality. The notion of precarious manhood suggests that the assertion, safeguarding, and maintenance of masculinity requires a continual display of role-typical behavior. When a man detects a threat to his masculine status, he seeks to reestablish that status both in his own and others' regard. Having multiple sexual partners is one means of reestablishing threatened masculine status. We conceptualize racial discrimination as a potential threat to young African American men's sense of masculine status that affects the personal and contextual mediating factors that Anderson suggested.

The model in Figure 1 specifies an initial link between male African American youth's exposure to racial discrimination and psychological distress. Studies document that psychological distress induced by racial discrimination commonly includes a sense of frustration and powerlessness (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). Given that a sense of personal efficacy and mastery of one's circumstances is central to many conceptualizations of masculine gender role expression (Goff, Di Leone, & Kahn, 2012), young men were hypothesized to cope with discrimination-induced distress by adopting two interrelated sexual risk processes: attitudes that support having multiple sexual partners and affiliations with peers who endorse those attitudes. These sexual risk processes were expected to predict proximally young men's reports of involvement with multiple sexual partners. The model in Figure 1 also includes the proposal that not all young men exposed to racial discrimination will report having multiple sexual partners. We considered protective parenting practices as a buffer against the negative influence of racial discrimination on youth's psychological distress. In the following sections, we review the empirical support for each path presented in Figure 1.

The Psychological Consequences of Racial Discrimination

Racial discrimination refers to unfair treatment because of minority status by individuals from a dominant group (Feagin & Eckberg, 1980). Harrell (2000) described a type of discrimination involving “microstressors,” everyday experiences with racism that include being ignored, overlooked, or mistreated in ways that lead to feelings of demoralization and dehumanization. These experiences are often minimized and not considered serious enough to address, but their accumulation has significant consequences for both mental (Brody et al., 2006) and physical (Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003) health. During adolescence, young people experience rapid development in their self-concepts and ethnic identities, while their cognitive development increases their awareness of unjust treatment (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Gibbons et al., 2007; Roberts et al., 2011). Discriminatory experiences thus become increasingly recognizable to young people and have the potential to affect their developing sense of personal efficacy.

In the model presented in Figure 1, we hypothesized that racial discrimination affects men’s sexual behavior indirectly by engendering psychological distress. Multiple studies document the psychological distress that racial discrimination induces among African Americans, both adults (Brown et al., 2000; Carter & Forsyth, 2010; Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000) and adolescents (Gibbons et al., 2007, 2010; Roberts, 2011). Racially induced psychological distress integrates aspects of negative emotionality with behavioral control, including self-efficacy and optimism (Bowman, 1984; Uomoto, 1986; Williams et al., 2012). The close links between negative affect and self-regulation or self-efficacy are apparent in “learned helplessness” models of stress reactions (Maier and Seligman, 1976). Success in setting goals, striving to attain them, and achieving them is reciprocally associated with positive affect in adolescents (Buckner, Mezzacappa, & Beardslee, 2009; Scott et al., 2008). Conversely, adolescents are particularly vulnerable to cycles of negative affect when goals seem unattainable or simply not worth setting.

Racial Discrimination and Masculinity

The psychological distress induced by racial discrimination is thought to affect sexual behavior by posing a threat to masculinity. Although masculinity is a multidimensional construct, many conceptualizations of masculine gender role expression, including those that focus specifically on African American men (Hammond & Mattis 2005), include a sense of confidence, optimism, and mastery as central components (Choi, 2004; Goff, Di Leone, & Kahn, 2012; Long, 1989; Robins, 1986). When young men are confronted with the frustration and sense of helplessness that discrimination occasions, we expect that some will seek ways to reassert status and a sense of personal esteem. The notion of racial discrimination as a threat to masculinity was recently investigated experimentally with African American and Caucasian men. Goff and colleagues (2012) found that exposure to race-based insults in a laboratory situation increased hypermasculine behavior among African American, but not Caucasian, men. Goff et al. reasoned that the pervasiveness of racial discrimination differentially affected men’s responses to specific instances of discrimination. Caucasian men were buffered from discrimination-associated masculinity

threat by their social status, in which discrimination was relatively rare and posed far less of an overall barrier to achieving life goals.

Consistent with these findings, in the conceptual model presented in Figure 1 we hypothesized that experiences with racial discrimination would be linked to increases in psychosocial distress that, in turn, would encourage young men to adopt attitudes that encourage involvement with multiple sexual partners and to affiliate with peers who hold the same values. Anderson (1989, 1990) elaborated the mechanisms linking psychological distress to male sexuality. He maintained that many young men who experience discrimination and other threats to personal esteem are drawn to identify and affiliate with peers who hold negative attitudes towards intimacy-promoting relationship qualities such as love and commitment. These highly influential peer groups promote a view of sex as a game, in which women are tokens and men compete with each other to gain social status (Giordano, Longmore, Manning, & Northcutt, 2009). According to Anderson (1989), peers constitute a critical component in the adoption of these attitudes, as youth come to care more about the opinions of male peers than those of female romantic partners. Peer groups become the primary referent for evaluating behavior in sexual relationships and one's own status and esteem. We thus hypothesized that, when confronted with discrimination-induced psychological distress, young men may simultaneously adopt attitudes that condone multiple sexual partners and affiliate with peers who reinforce these attitudes. Other research has also indicated that adolescents' acceptance of risky behaviors and affiliation with risk-taking peer groups are proximal, robust predictors of sexual behavior (Kogan et al., 2011).

The Protective Influence of Parenting

Powerful factors that protect rural African American adolescents from high-risk behaviors originate in the family environment, particularly in parents' caregiving practices (Brody, Dorsey, Forehand, & Armistead, 2002; Brody et al., 2001; Murry & Brody, 1999). Based upon patterns of family life established in African societies and modified in response to enslavement in America (Sudarkasa, 1988), reliance on family and extended kin networks has supported African Americans through multiple social transitions (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; McLoyd et al. 2007). African Americans' family-centered orientation has been found to protect adolescents from the influences of economic distress (Wills, Gibbons, Gerrard, Murry, & Brody, 2003) and racial discrimination (Brody et al., 2006) on youth development. In studies of rural African American families, Brody and colleagues (Brody, Kim, Murry, & Brown, 2004; Brody, Kogan, & Grange, 2012) identified a cluster of protective parenting practices that includes close, involved relationships, parental monitoring, communication, and a sense of pride in being African American that includes preparation for handling discrimination. These parenting practices protect African American youth from dangerous surroundings, hazardous experiences, and involvement in antisocial activity (Brody et al., 2004; Brody, Kim, Murry, & Brown, 2005; Simons, Chen, Stewart, & Brody, 2003) while decreasing their likelihood of developing depressive symptoms (Kim et al., 2003; Simons et al., 2002). Therefore, we expect that, for youth who receive high levels of protective parenting, the influence of racial discrimination on psychological distress will be attenuated, thus preventing the development of sexual risk processes.

Racial Discrimination and Confounding Processes

The experience of racial discrimination is most commonly assessed via self-report. A person's perception of discrimination and the effects of a given interaction depend greatly on individual differences. Sources of variability in perceived discrimination may provide alternative explanations for its effects. Researchers who investigate the effects of racial discrimination, however, seldom consider the personality and behavioral factors that can influence youth's likelihood of noting, attending to, and reporting experiences with discrimination. We consider two such factors in our study. First, discriminatory experiences can induce anger and hostility; in turn, these emotions can heighten recognition and salience of future experiences with discrimination (Brondolo et al., 2008). When considering the influence of racial discrimination as an effect on health and development, it is thus useful to disentangle state anger or hostility from daily experiences. From the standpoint of behavioral processes, discrimination covaries with youth's involvement in delinquent behaviors (Simons et al., 2003). Youth who are involved in delinquency may elicit hostility from authority figures and distrust from community members. Effects of reported discrimination on outcomes may thus be, in part, a product of involvement with delinquent behavior. Thus, co-occurring hostility or delinquency render difficult discernment of the effects of self-reported discriminatory experiences per se versus confounding variables. In our investigation, we account for the potential of youth's self-reported hostility and delinquent behavior to inflate reports of discrimination, permitting a more refined analysis of the predictive salience of perceived discrimination for sexual partnerships. We also considered the potential influence of socioeconomic disadvantage, a robust risk factor for having multiple sexual partners (McLoyd, 1990; Wickrama, Merten, & Wickrama, 2012).

Methods

Study hypotheses were tested with data from 221 African American male adolescents recruited randomly from lists provided by public high schools in six rural Georgia counties. Youth were enrolled in the study when they were 16.0 ($SD = .60$) years of age; they provided self-report data at ages 16 and 18 ($M = 17.56$, $SD = .57$) years. Data were collected in the context of a family-based prevention study (Kogan, Brody, et al., 2012). Among the participants, 112 participated in the index intervention and 109 participated in an attention control. Neither intervention assignment nor intervention dose was associated with any study variable. For the present study, assignment to the prevention or attention-control condition was controlled in all data analyses. At age 16, among youth's families, median household gross monthly income was \$2,016.00 ($SD = \$4,353.86$) and mean monthly per capita gross income was \$887.54 ($SD = 1,578.98$). Although youth's caregivers worked an average of 38.5 hours per week, 42% of the families lived below federal poverty standards and another 15% lived within 150% of the poverty threshold; they could be described as working poor (Boatright, 2009).

Procedures

Community liaisons, African American community members who resided in the counties where the participants lived, contacted families and enrolled them in the study. Selected on

the basis of their social contacts and standing in the neighborhood, community liaisons worked with the researchers on participant recruitment and retention. At each data collection, caregivers gave written consent to minor youth's participation, and youth gave written assent or consent to their own participation. To enhance rapport and cultural understanding, African American university students and community members served as field researchers to collect data. During each assessment, each family had one home visit that lasted 2 hours. At the home visit, self-report questionnaires were administered privately via audio computer-assisted self-interviewing technology on a laptop computer. After each assessment, youth were paid \$50 and parents were paid \$100. All study protocols were approved by the university IRB.

Measures

Multiple sexual partners—At ages 16 and 18, participants reported the numbers of partners with whom they had engaged in sexual activity during the past 3 months. To distinguish youth who were likely to be involved with multiple sexual partners from those who transitioned from one monogamous relationship to another, the count variable was dichotomized, with 1 = *3 or more partners* and 0 = *less than 3 partners*.

Racial discrimination—Perceived racial discrimination was assessed at age 16 and age 18 with a 9-item scale adapted from Williams's (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000) research on racially based microstressors. Focus groups of community members identified microstressors that occurred most frequently and suggested wording changes to increase clarity (Murry & Brody, 2004). Youth reported how often in the past 12 months each stressor occurred, from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*frequently*). Example items included, "How often have you been treated rudely or disrespectfully because of your race?" "How often have you been watched or followed while in public because of your race?" and "How often have your ideas or opinions been put down, ignored, or belittled because of your race?" Cronbach's alpha was .90.

Psychological distress—Psychological distress was operationalized at ages 16 and 18 as a latent construct composed of two measures: the State Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1996) and the Negative Affect subscale of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies–Depression (CES–D; Radloff, 1977) scale. The State Hope Scale assesses the extent to which participants had formed goals and felt efficacious in pursuing them. Participants rated six items on a scale ranging from 1 (*really false*) to 5 (*really true*); example items include, "At the present time I am energetically pursuing my goals," and "I can think of many ways to reach my current goals." Cronbach's alpha was .80 at age 16 and .87 at age 18. The CES–D is a well-validated assessment of depressive symptoms that is strongly linked with optimism and negative affectivity (Lincoln, Taylor, Watkins, & Chatters, 2011; Sultan & Fisher, 2010). The Negative Affect subscale includes 7 items; respondents use a scale ranging from 1 (*rarely or none of the time*) to 5 (*most or all of the time*) to indicate the extent to which they experienced each symptom during the past week. Sample items included, "How often did you feel fearful?" "How often did you feel sad?" and "How often did you think your life was a failure?"

Sexual risk processes—The sexual risk processes construct was operationalized at ages 16 and 18 using items that reflected youth’s attitudes towards risky sexual behavior and their perceptions of their peers’ behaviors and attitudes. Youth responded to three items adapted from the Tolerance for Deviance Measure: “How often is it okay for someone your age to have sex?” “How often is it okay for someone your age to have sex with someone you do not know well?” and “How often is it okay is it for someone your age to have sex without a condom?” The response scale ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Cronbach’s alpha was .79 at age 16 and .78 at age 18. Youth also responded to five items regarding their close friends’ behaviors and attitudes. Two items began with the stem, “How many of your close friends in the last 3 months:” followed by “had sex with someone they did not know well?” and “have gotten a girl pregnant?” The response scale ranged from 1 (*none of them*) to 3 (*all of them*). The other three items began with the stem, “How many of your friends believe:” followed by “it’s okay to be abstinent, that is, choose not to have sex?” (reverse coded), “it’s okay to have sex with someone you just met?” and “cheating on your partner is okay?” The response scale ranged from 1 (*none of them*) to 5 (*all of them*). The five items were standardized and summed. Cronbach’s alpha was .66 at age 16 and .65 at age 18.

Protective parenting—At age 16, youth completed a protective parenting instrument (Brody et al., 2006), which was composed of summed and standardized scores from scales that assess caregiver-youth interaction quality (6 items), racial socialization practices (11 items), and parental monitoring (5 items). Interaction quality items were adapted from the Interactional Behavior questionnaire (Prinz, Foster, Kent, & O’Leary, 1979); they included, “You and your caregiver reach an agreement during arguments,” and “You are well behaved in your discussions with your caregiver.” Racial socialization items were derived from Hughes’ (2003) measure and included items about preparing for discrimination (e.g., “How often did your caregiver talk with you about the possibility that some people might treat you badly or unfairly because of your race?”) and instilling cultural pride (e.g., “How often did your caregiver talk with you about important people or events in the history of your racial group?”). Monitoring items (Brody et al., 2006) included, “How often does your caregiver know when you get in trouble at school or someplace else away from home?” and “How often does your caregiver know when you do not do the things s/he asked you to do?” Each item was rated on a response set that ranged from 1 (*always*) to 4 (*never*). Alpha for the 22-item scale was .81.

Control variables—Control variables were assessed at age 16. Hostility was assessed with an eight-item scale (Joe, Broome, Rowan-Szal, & Simpson, 2002). On a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), participants responded to items that included, “You have a hot temper,” and “You feel a lot of anger inside you.” Cronbach’s alpha was .86. Youth also completed a checklist indicating the number of times in the past 6 months they had engaged in each of 13 delinquent behaviors. The checklist was based on Elliot’s (Elliot, Ageton, & Huizinga, 1985) National Youth Survey and comprised items that demonstrated the greatest variability in our prior studies with rural African American youth. Example behaviors included, “taken something worth \$25 or more that didn’t belong to you,” and “purposefully damaged or destroyed property that didn’t belong to you.” The

frequency of each behavior was summed across the 13 items to form the conduct problems score. Cronbach's alpha was .71.

At the age 16 time point, a socioeconomic disadvantage index was formed from the combination of six dichotomous variables based on parents' reports of household demographic information and experience of economic hardship; this index has been used in previous studies (Kogan, Yu, et al., 2012). The variables were family poverty based on federal guidelines, caregiver unemployment, receipt of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, caregiver single-parent status, caregiver education level less than high school graduation, and caregiver-reported inadequacy of family income. The number of variables a parent reported constituted the family's score on the index; scores ranged from 0 to 6 ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.57$).

Plan of Analysis—Study hypotheses were tested with logistic structural equation modeling using Mplus software (Muthén & Muthén, 2012). Models were estimated using full information maximum likelihood (FIML) procedures, which test the model against all available data. Thus, data missing due to attrition do not produce missing cases; the interview protocols rendered nonresponse to individual items negligible. The measurement model was examined with a confirmatory factor analysis prior to hypothesis testing. The model presented in Figure 1 was then estimated with protective parenting excluded; the significance of indirect pathways was tested with bootstrapping. We specified an autoregressive model controlling for age 16 levels of sexual partners and mediating factors; this design, which controls for residual variability at age 18, indexes change over time. Baseline reports of socioeconomic disadvantage, hostility, and peer delinquency were also controlled. We then executed a second model that included protective parenting and a protective parenting \times discrimination interaction term as predictors of psychological distress. Model fit was assessed using chi-square, $\chi^2/df < 2.0$, comparative fit index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA).

Results

Of the 221 youth who provided data at age 16, 205 were retained at age 18. Analyses were conducted comparing youth who left or remained in the study on all study variables. No differences emerged. This analysis supports the use of FIML estimation in the structural models. At age 18, most young men (81.5%) reported fewer than 3 partners in the last 3 months; the remaining youth (18.5%) reported having 3 or more sexual partners.

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis of the measurement model composed of two latent variables: psychological distress (indicators, State Hope Scale and CES–D Negative Affect subscale) and sexual risk processes (indicators, attitudes scale and peer scale). The data fit the measurement model well: $\chi^2(14) = 13.89$, $p = ns$; $\chi^2/df = .99$; CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .00 (0, .06). All factor loadings were significant and in the expected direction, $\lambda > .4$. Associations among study variables, with means and standard deviations, are presented in Table 1.

Figure 2 presents the indirect effects model. The data fit the model well: $\chi^2(44) = 54.00, p = .144; \chi^2/df = .81; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .032 (0, .06)$. As hypothesized, racial discrimination at age 16 predicted, negatively, changes in psychological distress from age 16 to age 18, $\beta = -.25, p < .01$. Psychological distress predicted, negatively, change in youth's sexual risk processes from age 16 to age 18, $\beta = -.44, p < .001$. Changes in sexual risk processes constituted a proximal predictor of multiple sexual partnerships, $\beta = .48, p < .001$. The indirect effect of racial discrimination on multiple sexual partnerships via changes in psychological distress and sexual risk processes was $.053, SE = .024, p = .028$. Partial mediation also was indicated by a comparison of the age 16 estimate of racial discrimination on multiple sexual partners without mediators, $\beta = .25, p < .01$, versus the direct effect in the mode with mediators present, $\beta = .17, p < .05$.

Figure 3 presents the results of the test of the moderating influence of protective parenting on the association between racial discrimination and psychological distress. The interaction term combining racial discrimination and protective parenting significantly predicted changes in psychological distress, $\beta = .25, p < .01$. This interaction is described in Figure 4. For youth with high levels of protective parenting, the influence of racial discrimination was negligible. In contrast, racial discrimination was particularly pernicious for youth who experienced low levels of protective parenting.

Discussion

Research and theory suggest that racial discrimination during adolescence is stressful and demeaning, with the potential to undermine young African American men's sense of psychological distress. For young men, stressors that threaten their sense of competence may be interpreted in terms of threats to masculinity. This is particularly challenging for adolescent men due to multiple developmental changes that can result in heightened self-consciousness and increased anxiety regarding gender identity and self-presentation. Research has identified a link between masculinity threats and men's engagement in behaviors to enhance their sense of status and efficacy through exaggerated displays of masculinity, such as involvement with multiple sexual partners. We tested a model specifying the pathways through which racial discrimination was associated with having multiple sexual partners among African American men during late adolescence. Study findings supported our hypotheses. Experiences with discrimination predicted psychological distress, which in turn predicted the development of attitudes and peer affiliations supportive of having multiple sexual partners.

Our results are consistent with Anderson's (1989) and Spencer's (Spencer, Fegley, Harpalani, & Seaton, 2004) perspectives regarding young men's development of sexuality in adverse circumstances. These researchers proposed that the sense of frustration and helplessness that racial discrimination induces may lead some youth to adopt risky attitudes and peer affiliations. From a precarious manhood perspective, the findings suggest that racial discrimination may constitute a threat to masculinity that led some men to cope by seeking "sexual conquests." According to Anderson and Spencer, the transformation of intrapersonal distress into a heightened focus on and pursuit of sexual conquests represents a coping mechanism intended to establish status and esteem in the face of a threat to one's

sense of personhood. To the extent that racial discrimination poses a threat to a young man's sense of masculinity and status, sexual conquest may become an avenue for affirming his right to esteem and status. Wolfe (2003) postulated that such "hypermasculine" displays and behaviors play a largely compensatory role, providing a show of masculinity as a reaction against the negative messages about themselves that young African American men receive.

Although racial discrimination was associated with increased psychological distress, not all young men who experienced racial discrimination reported multiple sexual partnerships. Studies indicate that parenting practices that include racial socialization, involved/supportive relationships, and close parental monitoring can protect youth from the influences of racial discrimination on psychological functioning (Brody et al., 2006) and substance use (Gibbons et al., 2010). Consistent with these studies, we found that protective parenting practices also protected male adolescents from the influence of racial discrimination on psychological distress. When youth received high levels of protective parenting, racial discrimination had no discernable influence on their levels of psychological distress. The validation of family protective processes suggests the importance of targeting parenting practices in interventions designed to protect African American male adolescents from the consequences of racial discrimination. Specifically, interventions should focus on the enrichment of parent-youth interactions, parents' provision of racial socialization, and parental monitoring. A number of evidence-based programs have proven effective in enhancing these processes (Coatsworth, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2002; Kogan, Yu, et al., 2012; Stormshak, Dishion, Light, & Yasui, 2005). For example, the Strong African American Families-Teen program for youth age 14-16 years affects family relationships processes (Kogan, Brody, et al., 2012) and has been shown to increase safer sex (Kogan, Yu, et al., 2012). The identified risk mechanisms in this study also point to the importance of programs designed to augment young men's sense of personal agency to meet valued life goals and counteract discrimination-induced psychological distress. The importance of same-sex peers in sustaining and reinforcing attitudes that celebrate multiple sexual partners suggests the value of developing ways to change peer norms in these groups or encouraging selection of peers with more flexible norms for masculine behavior.

The present study requires important caveats regarding interpretation. First, although the results document an important pathway that accounts for within-group variability in multiple sexual partnerships, it is important to note that the vast majority of African American youth in this sample did not report multiple partners. Second, behaviors and attitudes focused on sexual conquest are by no means limited to African American youth. Due to the public health significance of multiple sexual partnerships and their prevalence among minority youth, little attention has been given to this behavior among Caucasian youth. This omission can perpetuate stereotypes about African American men and Latinos by stigmatizing their sexual behavior as problematic while similar behavior among Caucasian men is virtually unacknowledged and unexamined. Such a view also minimizes the critical importance of inequities in the social contexts that create the conditions under which such behaviors are most likely to be pursued. The present study, along with other work (Bowleg, 2004; Hammond, 2012), highlights the power of contextual factors such as discrimination to alter personal well-being in ways that later become public health problems.

Several limitations in the present study should be noted. Although theory regarding masculinity ideologies informed our predictions, and pursuit of multiple sexual partners is extensively accepted as an expression of certain masculine ideologies (Chu, Porche, & Tolman, 2005; Noar & Morokoff, 2002), data on young men's ideologies concerning masculinity were not available. Future research that provides a more in-depth view of men's self-reported conformity to specific masculine roles and ideological orientations would complement and extend the present study. We conceptualized psychological distress as a combination of negative affect and low levels of state hope. It is also plausible that discrimination-induced changes in hopefulness and efficacy could lead to problems with affect regulation. Research that includes laboratory and physiological designs is indicated to characterize more precisely the effects of discrimination.

In the present study, we focused on protective parenting as factor buffering youth from the influence of discrimination. Optimism, self-regulation, and racial identity processes have also been identified as important protective factors. These processes may have affected heterogeneity in response to discrimination in the present study, suggesting plausible alternative hypotheses for additional research. We also focused on one primary caregiver, almost always a mother. To date, little is known about the ways in which socialization from fathers and father figures may function to protect young men from the effects of discrimination. This is an understudied area that warrants attention in the future. Although this study was novel in its focus on rural youth, the results cannot be assumed to generalize to youth in other environments. Replication with urban and suburban samples may detect effects of poverty on youth sexual behavior. Finally, studies in which both attitudes and behaviors are self-reported are subject to reporter bias that can inflate associations. The use of multiple measures operationalized as latent variables can ameliorate to some extent concerns regarding measurement bias. These caveats notwithstanding, the present research provides evidence of a theoretically derived pathway linking racial discrimination to multiple sexual partnerships among a distinct sample of African American male youth. These findings provide valuable insights for intervention development and policy aimed at deterring sexually transmitted infections and enhancing relationship development among young men.

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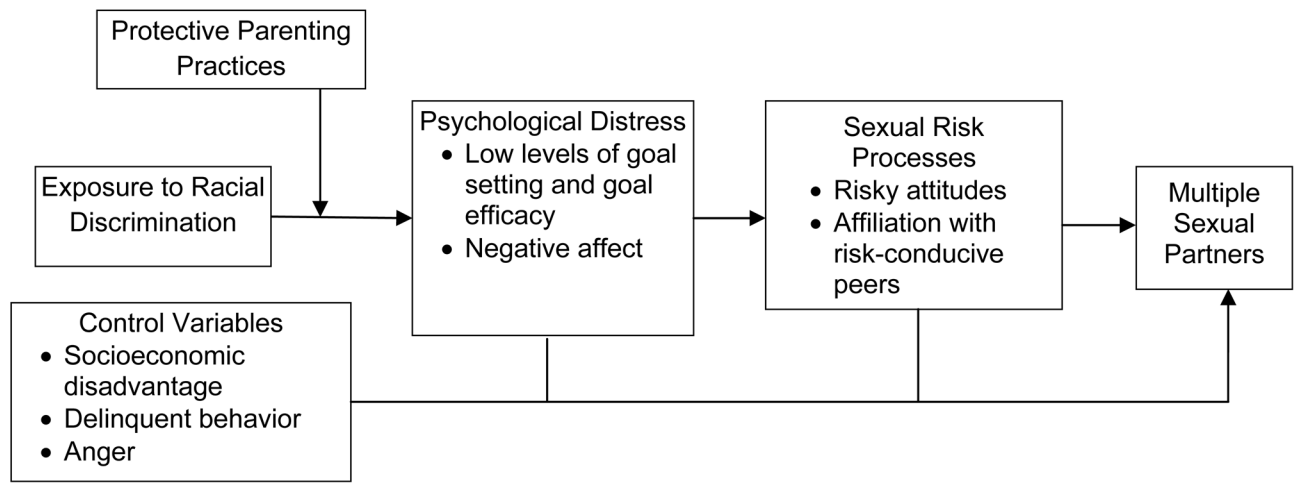


Figure 1.
Conceptual model.

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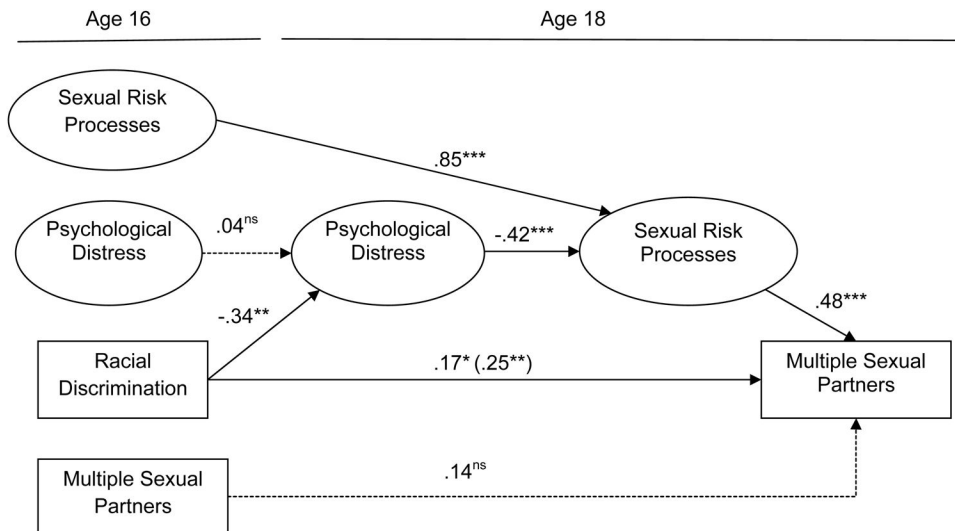


Figure 2. Indirect effects model predicting sexual partners. Socioeconomic disadvantage, risk behavior, and hostility are controlled. Dotted lines indicate nonsignificant pathways. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

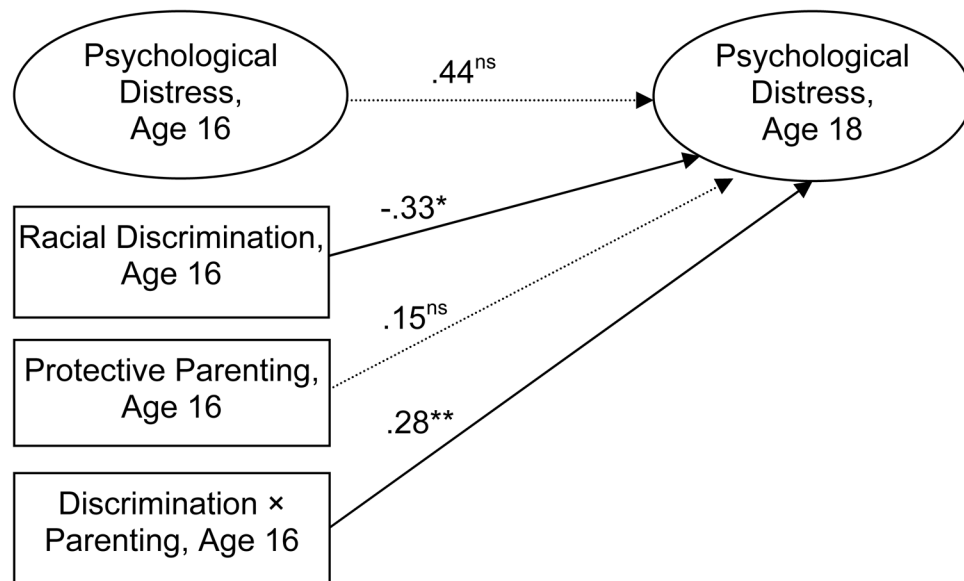


Figure 3. Effect of the interaction between discrimination and protective parenting on changes in psychological distress. Dotted lines indicate nonsignificant pathways. * p .05. ** p .01. *** p .001.

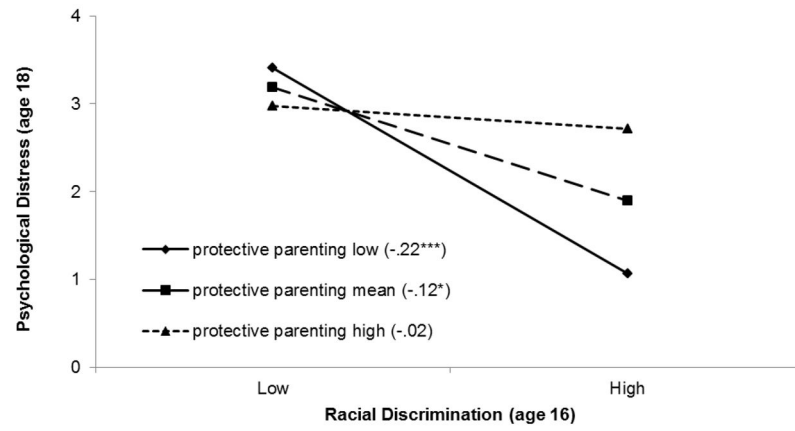


Figure 4. The effect of racial discrimination on psychological distress by levels of protective parenting. Numbers in parentheses refer to simple slopes for low (1 standard deviation below the mean), mean, and high (1 standard deviation above the mean) levels of protective parenting. ** p .01. *** p .001.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. SES disadvantage (16)	--														
2. Conduct problems (16)	.10	--													
3. Hostility (16)	-.02	.39***	--												
4. Racial discrimination (16)	-.03	.08	.25***	--											
5. Protective parenting (16)	-.21**	-.19**	-.30***	.06	--										
6. State hope (16)	-.15*	-.17*	-.17*	-.04	.27***	--									
7. State hope (18)	-.13	-.17*	-.20***	-.17*	.24**	.33***	--								
8. Negative affect (16)	.09	.30***	.35***	.23**	-.12	-.18*	-.16*	--							
9. Negative affect (18)	.06	.15*	.14*	.25***	-.02	-.08	-.22***	.30***	--						
10. Attitude toward sex (16)	-.02	.03	.29***	.09	-.05	-.10	-.07	.03	-.05	--					
11. Attitude toward sex (18)	-.02	.13	.15*	.14*	-.05	-.03	-.11	.00	.17*	.45***	--				
12. Peers' sexual behaviors (16)	-.17*	.12	.38***	.16*	-.16*	-.10	-.09	.17*	.05	.51***	.34***	--			
13. Peers' sexual behaviors (18)	-.08	.09	.14*	.11	-.16*	-.03	-.09	.11	.26***	.35***	.56***	.49***	--		
14. Multiple sexual partners (16)	-.04	.16*	.20**	.05	-.16*	-.08	-.12	-.08	.01	.09	.06	.24***	.19**	--	
15. Multiple sexual partners (18)	.11	.11	.18*	.23**	-.11	-.02	-.17*	.05	.12	.20**	.29***	.26***	.29***	.20**	--
Mean	2.56	7.37	14.96	13.46	0	24.42	24.53	2.18	2.20	1.95	2.07	0	0	0.07	0.18
SD	1.57	15.06	5.35	5.32	9.81	3.26	3.73	3.12	3.50	1.02	1.04	0.65	0.65	0.25	0.39

Note. Numbers in parentheses refer to age in years.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.