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Racial Discrimination and Racial Identity as Risk or Protective Factors for Violent Behaviors in African American Young Adults

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This study examined the influences of racial discrimination and different racial identity attitudes on engaging in violent behavior among 325 African American young adults. The contributions of racial discrimination and racial identity attitudes in explaining violent behavior during the transition into young adulthood while controlling for the influences of prior risk behaviors at ninth grade were examined separately for males and females. In addition, the buffering effects of racial identity attitudes on the relationship between racial discrimination and violent behavior were tested. Results indicated that experience with racial discrimination was a strong predictor of violent behavior, regardless of gender. The centrality of race for males and the meaning others attribute to being Black for both males and females were moderators of the influence of racial discrimination on violent behavior.

KEY WORDS: African American adolescents; racial discrimination; gender differences; protective factors; racial identity; violence.

Most studies find that about 30–40% of male and 15–30% of female youths report having committed violent acts by age 17 (USDHHS, 2001). Extensive evidence has accumulated on the effects of specific psychosocial and environmental risk factors for the perpetration of violent behaviors. Youth violence in the United States has been associated consistently with aggressiveness, antisocial behavior, and poverty during childhood, substance use, antisocial peer groups, parent disciplinary practices, parents with favorable attitudes toward violence, family functioning, academic failure, and being male (Blaske, Borduin, Henggeler, & Mann, 1989; Farrington & Loeber, 2000; Florsheim, Tolan, & Gorman-Smith, 1996; Gorman-Smith, Tolan, Zelli, & Huesmann, 1996; Gorman-Smith, Tolan, Loeber, & Henry, 1998; Guerra, Husemann, Tolan, Van Acker, & Eron, 1995; Hawkins et al., 2000; Henggeler, 1989; Henry, Tolan, & Gorman-Smith, 2001; Herrenkohl et al., 2001; Kosterman et al., 2001; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1998; Tolan & Lorion, 1988; USDHHS, 2001). Yet, the majority of youth at risk for committing violent acts do not engage in violent behaviors (Zimmerman, Steinman, & Rowe, 1998).

The Surgeon General's (USDHHS, 2001) recent report on youth violence concludes that risk factors do not operate in isolation and that they can be buffered by protective factors. Several individual characteristics (e.g., self-concept, intolerant attitude toward deviance, commitment to school) and environmental conditions (e.g., supportive family and school environments, resource rich neighborhoods) have been proposed to be protective against youth violence (Hawkins et al., 1998; Kosterman et al., 2001;

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Paschall & Hubbard, 1998; Resnick et al., 1997). This suggests the importance of an ecological framework in explaining these behaviors. The ecological model posits that youth violence is a function of individual psychosocial characteristics, social influences, and societal constraints (Guerra et al. 1995; Paschall & Hubbard, 1998). From a developmental perspective, youths' psychosocial characteristics are expected to interact over time with the social contexts in which they live (e.g., families, neighborhoods, schools, peer groups) to determine whether or not they engage in violent acts (Patterson, 1992). Guerra et al. (1995), for example, found that stressful life events and normative beliefs supporting violent behavior among African American children mediated the propensity for violence.

Most research on violence among African American youth is limited because it has virtually ignored the significance of sociocultural influences such as racial identification or racial discrimination as either psychosocial or social contextual factors for understanding violent behavior. Research on youth violence is often descriptive, reporting only racial differences in violent behaviors with little or no explanation of how sociocultural factors may have influenced the perpetration or avoidance of engaging in violent acts (Hammond & Yung, 1993). Examining race differences in violent behaviors without considering sociocultural influences provides partial information at best and inaccurate information at worst about a given youth's propensity for violence (Jagers, 1996). There is growing interest in the relationship between cultural factors and aggression and delinquency among African American youth (Hawkins, 1993; Jagers, 1996). A few studies of race-differences in aggressive behavior provide limited evidence that African American youth, especially males, may differ from other groups of youth in aggressive responses to everyday social encounters (Yager & Rotheram-Borus, 2000). There is no evidence, however, that problem behavior among youth is related to simply being African American (Jagers, 1997; Jagers & Mock, 1993; Spencer & Depree, 1996). As the Surgeon General (USDHHS, 2001) asserts, risk markers such as race or ethnicity are frequently used as risk factors for violence, yet being African American has no causal relationship to violence. On the other hand, living in environments with limited opportunities and little supports for success increases the risk for engaging in violent acts (Herrenkohl et al., 2001). African American youths are more likely than are White youths to live in such environments (USDHHS, 2001). Thus, African American youths are vulnerable to experiencing additional stress as they negotiate the developmental tasks of adolescence. This is especially true during late adolescence as they begin to solidify their identity and establish a place for themselves within society.

One source of stress for African American youth transitioning into adulthood is racial discrimination (Krieger, 1990; Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003). Some have argued that racial discrimination is a fundamental part of the social structure in the lives of African Americans (Cross, Parham, & Helms, 1998; Jackson, Brown, Williams, Torres, Sellers, & Brown, 1996; Williams, Spencer, & Jackson, 1999). The experience of racial discrimination over the life course, however, may vary. In an ethnically diverse sample of 11–17-year-olds, Romero and Roberts (1998) found that older youths were more likely than younger youths to perceive experiences of racial discrimination, and that African American youth reported higher levels of perceived racial discrimination than Mexican-American, Vietnamese-American, or European American youth. Experiences with racial discrimination during a time when a number of psychological and social changes occur can be daunting. Youth transitioning into young adulthood who perceive that society devalues their racial group may act out by engaging in violent behavior as a way to cope with stressful racial experiences.

Experiences of racial discrimination and racism have not been explicitly examined in studies of violence among African American youth despite a growing literature supporting the deleterious mental and physical effects of discriminatory experiences on African American adults (Anderson, 1989; Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002; Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Dion, Dion, & Pak, 1992; Miller & Kaiser, 2001; Smedley, Stith, & Nelson, 2002; Williams et al., 1999). Among ethnic minority youth, determining the relationship between cultural factors as risk for or protective against socially problematic behaviors is an emerging research area that should recognize that perceptions of racial discrimination is important in explaining youth violent behavior. This is particularly true for youth that have not fully developed critical coping resources for understanding and effectively negotiating racially discriminatory experiences.

Engaging in some violent behavior is relatively common during childhood and early adolescence; however, it is expected that the perpetration of violence will diminish during the transition into young

adulthood (Kosterman et al., 2001; Moffitt, 1991; USDHHS, 2001). Kosterman et al. (2001), for example, found that reports of engaging in violent behavior decreased from 55 to 16% between adolescence and young adulthood. Because most research on youth violence and African Americans is cross-sectional and focuses on children and younger adolescents, the relationship between experiences with racial discrimination and violent behavior among young adults is not understood. Previous research does suggest that interpersonal conflict and violence in the home and community will result in violent behavior, psychological distress, a negative outlook on the future, and a low sense of self-worth among children and youth, especially among African American males (Guerra et al., 1995; Paschall & Hubbard, 1998; Yager & Rotheram-Borus, 2000).

A critical aspect of self-worth for many African American youth is the establishment of a racial identity (Cross et al., 1998; Phinney, 1990; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997; Spencer, Cunningham, & Swanson, 1995). Helms (1990) noted that racial identity "is a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he/she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group" (p. 3). A growing body of evidence demonstrates the importance of a salient racial identity as a psychosocial protector in both mental health functioning and health risk behaviors such as substance use (Belgrave et al., 1994; Brook, Balka, Brook, Win, & Gursen, 1998; Caldwell, Zimmerman, Bernat, Sellers, & Notaro, 2002; Klonoff & Landrine, 1999; Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998; Scheier, Botvin, Diaz, & Ifill-Williams, 1997; Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003). Although research in this area is still emerging, it is generally accepted that a less salient racial identity is associated with poorer outcomes, whereas a strong and positive group affiliation is related to more positive outcomes. The relationship between racial identity and violent behavior has not been the focus of as much research as in the mental health and substance use areas. Nevertheless, a few promising studies highlight the potential of racial identity as a vital psychosocial protector against violent behaviors in African American youth.

Paschall and Hubbard (1998) examined the relationship between ethnic identity and violent behavior in 12–16-year-old African American males. They found that the propensity for violence among adolescent males decreased with an increase in their ethnic identity. Arbona, Jackson, McCoy, and Blakely (1999) found that ethnic identity was positively associated with attitudes against fighting in African American early adolescents, even after controlling for the influences of parental involvement and negative peer behaviors. Further, a longitudinal study of African American youth found that identity formation acted as an adaptive-coping response among economically vulnerable African American males (Spencer et al., 1995). These findings suggest that identifying with their ethnic group may provide African American youth with protections against engaging in violent behaviors. These studies, however, included relatively small African American samples, focused on males, examined attitudes and not behavior, considered only main effects, or included unidimensional measures of racial identity.

A number of researchers have argued that the concept of racial identity is a multidimensional construct (Gonzales & Cauce, 1995; Phinney, 1992; Romero & Roberts, 1998; Rotheram-Borus, Lightfoot, Moraes, Dopkins, & LaCour, 1998; Sanders-Thompson, 1994; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998; Smith, Walker, Fields, Brookins, & Seay, 1999; Stevenson, 1994). This reconceptualization suggests that different racial identity attitudes may relate to violent behavior in different ways. Sellers et al. (1997, 1998) offer a conceptual framework that focuses on both the significance that African Americans attribute to being Black and how they define what it means to be Black. Three components of this framework are particularly relevant when examining the relationship between racial identity and violent behavior in African American youth. These are racial centrality, private regard, and public regard. Racial centrality refers to the extent to which an individual normatively defines him/herself in terms of race. Private regard is the person's positive or negative evaluation of his/her racial group and his/her membership in that racial group, whereas public regard is a person's evaluation of how positive or negative the individual believes others view Black people.

Recent research suggests that different components of racial identity are associated with experiences with racial discrimination in different ways (Major, Levin, Schmader, & Sidanius, 1999; Operario & Fiske, 2001; Sellers et al., 2001; Shelton & Sellers, 2000). Operario and Fiske (2001), for example, found that when Asian, African American, and Latino respondents were highly ethnically identified (i.e., centrality), they also reported more personal experiences with racial discrimination than did less ethnically identified minorities. In addition, Shelton and Sellers

(2000) found that African Americans for whom race was a central component of their identity were more likely to attribute an ambiguous discriminatory situation to racism than African Americans for whom race was a less central component of their identity. Romero and Roberts (1998) found that the relationship between positive ethnic affirmation (i.e., private regard) and racial discrimination was mediated by attitudes toward other groups, whereas high ethnic exploration was directly related to perceptions of racial discrimination. Further, Sellers et al. (2003) found that racial centrality was both a risk factor for experiencing racial discrimination and a protective factor in buffering the negative impact of experiencing racial discrimination on psychological distress. In educational contexts, an awareness of the existence of racial discrimination in society (i.e., public regard) has been related to better social and academic outcomes for African American youth and young adults (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976). These findings offer evidence that examining multiple aspects of group identification may be helpful in understanding how racial or ethnic identity may influence psychosocial and behavioral outcomes.

In addition to the influence of race-related experiences and beliefs, gender group experiences may be related to violent behavior among African American youth. Extensive evidence exists for gender differences in the development and prevalence of violence, as well as gender-specific risk and protective factors for youth in general (for review see Loeber & Stauthamer-Loeber, 1998). Although research has shown gender differences in prevalence and incidence of violence, little research has focused on factors associated with violence for African American males and females. In research that has examined the interaction of ethnic identity, violence, and gender among African American youth, study samples often consist of only one gender group (primarily males), thus gender differences in race-related experiences and youth violence are assumed, but not empirically examined. This omission is problematic in that race-related experiences may occur and function differently for African American males and females. Research in the area of education, for example, suggests that African American females may be more attuned to issues of race and discrimination than males, yet they appear to adapt better psychologically and socially in the face of this discrimination (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976). Some argue that this may be due to female youth being less hypervisible (compared to males) and to their tendency to seek social support (Fleming, 1984). In the case of violence among African American youth, differences in violence rates among males and females may relate to gender differences in how these youth adapt and respond to experiences with racial discrimination.

The link between different racial identity attitudes and experiences with racial discrimination has not been examined as it relates to violent behaviors in African American youth. This study examines these issues in an effort to integrate individual and environmental factors in explaining risk for and protections against violent behavior among African American youth transitioning into young adulthood. The major research question concerns whether experiences with racial discrimination and racial identity attitudes are associated with violent behaviors after controlling for earlier adolescent risk factors (i.e., ninth-grade school performance, earlier violent behaviors). In addition, we explore whether the influence of racial discrimination on violent behaviors is moderated by different racial identity attitudes. It is possible that experiences with racial discrimination will be associated with more violent behavior, even in the presence of expected protective influences such as a strong racial identification. On the other hand, having a strong and positive group affiliation (i.e., racial centrality and private regard) and an awareness of racism in society (i.e., public regard) may buffer the effects of experiencing racial discrimination on violent behaviors as suggested by research on mental health outcomes (e.g., Sellers et al., 2003) and violent behavior in males (Paschall & Hubbard, 1998). Experiences with racial discrimination, for example, may only result in acts of violence among youth that do not view race as highly central, or among those with negative views about Blacks and how others view Blacks. Finally, we hypothesize that these relationships will be stronger for males than for females given the consistent finding that males engage in more violent acts than females (National Household Surveyon Deng Abuse [NHSDA], 1999; USDHHS, 2001) and that African American males report more experiences with racial discrimination than African American females (Bobo & Suh, 1995; Forman, Williams, & Jackson, 1997; Jackson et al., 1996; Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999; Schiele, 2000).

METHOD

Study Design

This study uses data from the Flint Adolescent Study (see Zimmerman, Salem, & Notaro, 2000, for a

full description of the sample). The initial study participants included 850 adolescents who participated in the first wave of a longitudinal study of school dropout and drug use in a large Midwestern city. Selection criteria were (1) having a grade-point average of 3.0 or lower by the end of eighth grade and (2) not being diagnosed as emotionally impaired or developmentally disabled. Data were collected in five waves. At Wave 1 (1994), all respondents were in the ninth grade. Participants were reinterviewed for the next 3 years at 1-year intervals whether they were in or out of school. Wave 5 data were collected approximately 2 years after Wave 4, as most youth were transitioning from high school into young adulthood. In the larger study, the response rate was 75% from Wave 1 to Wave 5.

The sample for the current study began with 471 urban African American youth that participated in both Wave 1 and Wave 5 of the larger study. In this study, Wave 1 variables were used as controls for findings at Wave 5. The final sample for this study includes 325 African American young adults with complete data for all study variables at Wave 5. Attrition analyses indicated that study participants were similar in background characteristics to the 146 youth with incomplete data on key study variables at Wave 5 as shown in Table I. Specifically, we found no differences between participating and nonparticipating young adults for violent behavior, family socioeconomic status (SES), highest grade completed, mother's education or family structure. We did find that those who did not participate in Wave 5 were slightly older, $t(471) = 2.55$, $p < .01$ and had lower ninth-grade GPAs, $t(624) = -2.11$, $p < .05$ than those who did participate. Also, females were more likely than males to remain in the study at Wave 5, $\chi^2(1, N = 324) = 12.08$, $p < .001$.

Table I. Sample Characteristics and Attrition Analysis

Variable	Participant Mean (*SD*)	Nonparticipant Mean (*SD*)	*t*
Violent behaviors Wave 1	1.21 (1.50)	1.44 (1.57)	1.92*ns*
Violent behaviors Wave 5	0.87 (1.31)	1.06 (1.51)	1.42*ns*
Ninth-grade GPA	1.58 (.97)	1.42 (.88)	−2.11*
Age Wave 5	20.01 (.66)	20.17 (.64)	2.55*
SES	40.24 (10.61)	39.42 (10.37)	−0.95*ns*
Highest grade completed	1.54 (1.26)	1.67 (1.42)	1.01*ns*
Mother's education	4.38 (1.86)	4.42 (1.90)	0.28*ns*
Father's education	5.27 (2.49)	5.21 (2.56)	−0.30*ns*

$*p < .05$.

Sample Characteristics

At Wave 5, 55% of the participants were female, 66% were employed, 39% were in postsecondary school or training, and 21% had not completed high school. The majority of these young adults were single, with no partner (59%), 3% were married, and 39% had a partner at the time of the initial interview. The mean prestige score for family socioeconomic status was 40.24 ($SD = 10.61$), indicating a blue-collar occupation (e.g., manufacturing) for most families. Forty-two percent of the sample was from single female-headed households, followed by 27% from two-parent families, 13% from extended families with mothers present, 9% from mother and stepfather families, and 9% from extended family with no parent present.

Data Collection Procedures

Structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with respondents in a community setting or in their home. The interviews lasted 50–60 min, and a self-administered paper and pencil questionnaire about drug and alcohol use, sexual behavior, racial identity attitudes, and racial discrimination was completed after the interview. Written consent was obtained before each interview and participants were informed that all information was confidential.

Measures

Violent Behaviors

At both Wave 1 and Wave 5, violent behavior was measured using a count of six different types of violent behaviors committed at least once during the past year. The six behaviors are being in a fight, being in a group fight, carrying a knife, carrying a gun, using a knife or gun, and intentionally hurting someone enough to need bandages or a doctor. Higher scores on this measure indicate that the respondent had engaged in more types of violent acts during the past year.

Racial Discrimination

Participants' experience with racial discrimination was assessed at Wave 5 using a 20-item scale that

asked about the racial hassles they may have experienced during the past year (Harrell, 1997). Sample items include "Others reacting to you as if they were afraid or intimidated," "Being insulted, called a name or harassed," and "Not being hired for a job." Participants were also asked to rate each racial hassle they had experienced using a 6-point response scale assessing how often the event occurred (0 = *never*; 5 = *once a week or more*). A scale ($\alpha = .94$) was constructed by calculating the mean of the frequency ratings for each discriminatory experience. Higher scores denote more frequent experiences with racial discrimination in the past year.

Racial Identity Attitudes

Participants completed shortened versions of the centrality, private regard, and public regard subscales of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI; Sellers et al., 1997) at Wave 5. The centrality subscale ($\alpha = .68$) consists of four items assessing the extent to which race was an important part of how they defined themselves. Sample items include "Being Black is a major part of my identity" and "I feel close to other Black people." The private regard subscale ($\alpha = .69$) consists of four items assessing the extent to which the respondent views Blacks positively or negatively. Sample items include "I am proud of being Black" and "I feel that the Black community has made many valuable contributions to this society." The public regard subscale ($\alpha = .59$) consists of six items assessing the extent to which other groups viewed Black people positively or negatively. Sample items include "In general, other groups view Blacks in a positive manner" and "Blacks are considered to be good by society." All response categories on these subscales were measured using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*).

Background Variables

Student grade-point averages (GPA) from ninth grade were obtained from school records. Gender was assessed using self-reported data. Socioeconomic status (SES) was assessed by prestige scores of participants' reports of parents' occupation (Nakao & Treas, 1990a, 1990b). When participants reported occupations for both parents, the higher prestige of the two occupations was used as the participants' measure of SES. Table II provides the descriptive statistics and skewness for key study variables.

Table II. Means, Standard Deviations, Ranges, and Skewness of Key Study Variables

Variable	*M*	*SD*	Range	Skewness
Violent behaviors—Wave 1	1.21	1.50	1–6	1.41
Violent behaviors—Wave 5	0.87	1.31	1–6	2.32
Ninth-grade GPA	1.58	0.97	0–4	0.16
Racial discrimination	0.79	0.85	0–5	1.83
Centrality	5.76	1.12	1–7	−1.14
Private regard	6.24	0.99	1–7	−2.28
Public regard	4.11	1.06	1–7	−0.13

Data Analysis Strategy

At the first stage of analysis, simple bivariate correlations were examined to determine the relationships among study variables. Table III presents the intercorrelations for these variables. At the second stage of analysis, hierarchical linear regression analyses were conducted to determine the contributions of racial discrimination and racial identity attitudes in explaining violent behaviors in young adults after controlling for the influences of background factors (i.e., gender, ninth-grade GPA, ninth-grade violent behavior). The background factors are used as control variables for testing the relationship between racial discrimination and racial identity variables as predictors of violent behavior during the transition to young adulthood (i.e., Wave 5 violent behavior). Experience with racial discrimination was entered as a single item at the second step. The three racial identity attitudes (i.e., centrality, private regard, and public regard) were entered at the third step, and interaction terms for all racial identity attitudes by racial discrimination were entered at the final step. The same hierarchical linear regression model was run for males and females separately, omitting gender at the first step. Finally, we decomposed significant interactions to interpret findings following the procedure described by Aiken and West (1991). Using centered variables, we computed separate equations for any association between a racial identity attitude and violent behaviors at the mean and one standard deviation above or below the mean for racial discrimination, then plotted the results.

Because the distributions for violent behavior at Wave 5 and the private regard variable were skewed (i.e., above 2.0), we conducted log transformations of these variables and reran the data analysis to determine the implications of transforming the variables for study findings. The results were virtually the same with the log-transformed variables as without;

Table III. Intercorrelations of Background, Racial Discrimination, Racial Identity Attitudes, and Violent Behavior Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Violent behaviors—Wave 1	—							
2. Violent behaviors—Wave 5	.252**	—						
3. Ninth-grade GPA	−.290**	−.204**	—					
4. Racial discrimination	.178**	.202**	−.003	—				
5. Centrality	−.092	−.040	−.071	.028	—			
6. Private regard	−.095	−.007	.065	−.043	.604**	—		
7. Public regard	.001	.006	−.136	−.223**	.174**	.153**	—	
8. SES	.016	−.056	.128*	.044	.028	.−.012	−.021	—

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

therefore, we used the original variables in the analyses for ease of interpretation.

RESULTS

Descriptive Results

Fifty-five percent of the sample committed at least one type of violent act in ninth grade and 42% of the sample committed at least one violent act during the transition into young adulthood. This represents a reduction in violent acts from ninth grade to young adulthood, $t(324) = 3.60$, $p < .001$. Further, 32% of the sample committed more than one type of violent act during adolescence, whereas 23% committed multiple violent acts as young adults. Males and females did not differ on violent behaviors in ninth grade, $t(323) = 1.04$, $p = ns$; however, a trend in the data suggests that males committed slightly more types of violent acts in the transition into adulthood than females, $t(257) = 1.93$, $p < .10$. The most frequently reported violent act during adolescence for this sample is being in a fight (26.8%), followed by carrying a knife (14.5%). Eighty-two percent of the sample had experienced at least one racially discriminatory episode during the past year. A median of seven racial hassles was reported, and no gender differences in experiences with racial discrimination were found, $t(324) = 1.20$, $p = ns$. Being stared at by strangers is the most frequently reported racial hassle (53.8%), followed by being observed or followed around (e.g., in stores; 52%).

With regard to racial identity attitudes, the majority of these young adults felt that race was a central part of their identity and they held positive attitudes toward Blacks and being Black (see Table II). Although fewer believed that other groups held African Americans in high regard, more than half of the sample scored above the scale mid-point. Males reported higher levels of centrality, $t(323) = 3.24$, $p < .01$, private regard, $t(322) = 1.99$, $p < .05$, and public regard, $t(323) = 3.28$, $p < .01$, than females.

Results of the correlational analysis indicate that violent behavior in ninth grade is associated with violent behavior in young adulthood (see Table III). Both adolescent and young adult violent behaviors are associated with reporting experiences with racial discrimination as young adults. None of the racial identity attitudes are correlated with violent behaviors in ninth grade or at young adulthood. Public regard and racial discrimination, however, are correlated such that young adults who believe that others think less favorably of their racial group reported experiencing more racial discrimination. SES was only correlated with ninth grade GPA $r(283) = .13$, $p < .01$) with higher prestige scores being associated with higher GPAs. Because SES was not related to violent behavior, racial discrimination, or racial identity, it was not included in subsequent analyses.

Multivariate Results

Hierarchical linear regression analyses are reported in Table IV. Findings indicate a trend toward gender differences in young adult violent behaviors, $B = -.51$, $p < .10$, when controlling for GPA and violent behavior in ninth grade, with males exhibiting slightly more violent behaviors than females. Ninth-grade GPA remained a predictor of engaging in violent behaviors at young adulthood. Specifically, young adults who had lower GPAs in the ninth grade exhibited more types of violent behaviors as young adults than those with higher GPAs in the ninth grade.

The inclusion of experiences with racial discrimination at the second step of the analysis explains an additional 3% of the variance in violent behaviors over prior adolescent risk factors. None of the racial identity subscales were predictors of violent

Table IV. Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Violent Behaviors ($N = 325$)

Variable	B	$SE\ B$	β	R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1				.08**	
Gender	−.51	.30	−.09†		
Ninth-grade GPA	−.46	.16	−.16**		
Violent behaviors—Wave 1	.07	.04	.09		
Step 2					.03**
Racial discrimination	.72	.15	.28***		
Step 3					.01
Centrality	−.28	.19	−.10		
Private regard	.25	.19	.09		
Public regard	.01	.16	.00		
Step 4					.04**
Centrality × discrimination	−.28	.17	−.10†		
Private regard × discrimination	−.06	.19	−.02		
Public regard × discrimination	.46	.14	.19***		
Total R^2				.16***	

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

behavior in the transition into young adulthood. The interaction terms at step four, however, accounted for an additional 4% of the variance. The public regard by racial discrimination interaction was significant, $B = .46$, $p < .001$, whereas the centrality by racial discrimination interaction only approached standard levels of significance, $B = -.28$, $p < .10$. A decomposition of the public regard by racial discrimination finding indicated that young adults who believe that other groups hold more positive attitudes toward Blacks and who experience more frequent racial discrimination engaged in more violent acts than those who believe that other groups hold more negative attitudes toward Blacks. Overall, this model accounted for 16% of the variance in young adult violent behavior.

To further examine gender differences and predictors of violence behavior at young adulthood, we estimated parallel models for males and females. These results are presented in Table V. In general, the full model accounts for 23% of the variance in violent behaviors for young adult males ($R^2 = .23$, $p < .001$) and 12% of the variance for young adult females ($R^2 = .12$, $p < .01$). Interestingly, ninth grade GPA is a risk factor for males, but not for females. On the other hand, racial discrimination is a strong predictor of violent behaviors, even after controlling for adolescent risk factors for both males and females. Racial discrimination explained an additional 5% of the variance for females and 3% for males. As with the model for the total sample, no direct effects were found for any of the racial identity attitudes entered at Step 3 for males or females.

We found significant interaction effects for racial identity attitudes and racial discrimination for both

Table V. Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Violent Behaviors by Gender ($n = 137$ Males; $n = 188$ Females)

	Males			Females		
Variable	B	$SE\ B$	ΔR^2	B	$SE\ B$	ΔR^2
Step 1			.12***			.03†
Ninth-grade GPA	−.63*	.25		−.25	.20	
Violent behaviors - Wave 1	.12	.07		.01	.06	
Step 2			.03*			.05**
Racial discrimination	.77**	.26		.76***	.20	
Step 3			.02			.01
Centrality	−.28	.35		−.25	.22	
Private regard	.53	.38		.13	.22	
Public regard	.02	.28		.04	.19	
Step 4			.07*			.03
Centrality × discrimination	−.72*	.34		−.09	.21	
Private regard × discrimination	.04	.33		−.17	.27	
Public regard × discrimination	.69**	.23		.40*	.19	
	$R^2 = .23$***			$R^2 = .12$**		

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

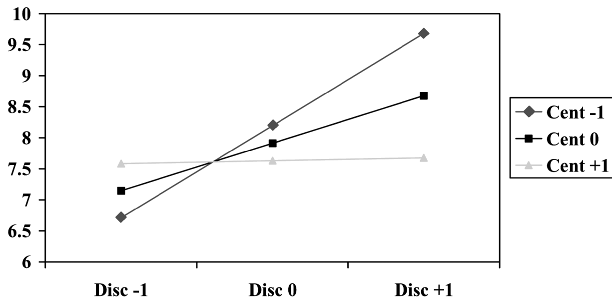
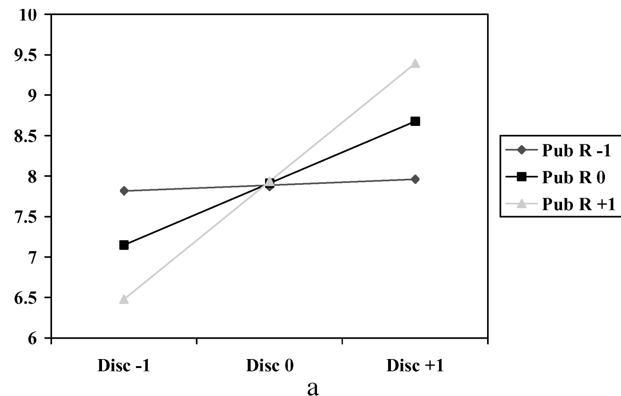


Fig. 1. Centrality by racial discrimination interaction for males.

males and females. An interaction was found for centrality by racial discrimination, $B = -.72$, $p < .05$, among males. Racial discrimination is associated with engaging in more types of violent behaviors for males for whom race is a less central identity, but it is not associated with violent behaviors for males for whom race is more central (see Fig. 1). An interaction effect for public regard and racial discrimination was found for both males, $B = .69$, $p < .01$, and females, $B = .40$, $p < .05$. Figure 2 shows the results of the decomposition of these interactions. As indicated, both males and females with high public regard reported engaging in more violent behavior when they experience higher levels of racial discrimination. This interaction accounted for an additional 7% of the variance in violent behavior for young adult males, but it did not contribute to explaining violent behaviors in young adult females ($\Delta R^2 = .03$, *ns*) after experience with racial discrimination and prior risk behaviors were considered.



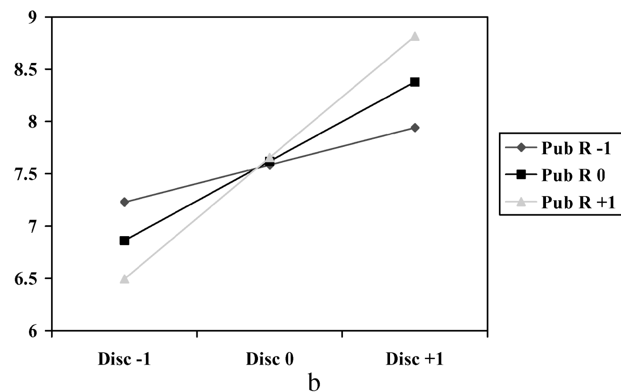


Fig. 2. a: Public regard by racial discrimination interaction for males; b: Public regard by racial discrimination interaction for females.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study represent a first step toward understanding the relationship between experiences with racial discrimination and violent behavior among African American youth transitioning into young adulthood. We found that experience with racial discrimination was the strongest risk factor for young adult violent behavior, which highlights the significance of race-relations as a critical social context for understanding violent behavior as a response to oppression. Some researchers point to the harmful effects of constantly ascribing unfair treatment to prejudice and discrimination (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Crocker & Major, 1989). Our findings suggest that individuals are not simply passive victims of discrimination who merely ascribe racial meaning to unfair treatment, rather, their response to racial discrimination can be violence, which has costly consequences both individually and for society as a whole. The influences of different racial identity attitudes as a risk for or protection against engaging in violent acts were also important findings in this study; however, our results suggest that these relationships are complex and often gender specific.

We found that 55% of the sample reported engaging in at least one violent behavior during adolescence, whereas 42% reported engaging in violent acts during young adulthood. These findings are partially consistent with Kosterman et al.'s study (Kosterman et al., 2001) that also found that 55% of their predominately White sample engaged in violent acts during adolescence; however they found that only 16% engaged in violent behavior at young adulthood. The persistence of violent behavior beyond adolescence for African American youth may represent ineffective coping with life stressors and challenges that come with the transition into young adulthood. The

expectation is that violent behaviors will diminish as youth make the transition into young adulthood (Kosterman et al., 2001; Moffitt, 1991), but those who continue to engage in violent acts are of particular concern to society. Herrenkohl et al.'s prospective study of violence (Herrenkohl et al., 2001) from childhood to young adulthood concluded that, "the continuation of violence across developmental periods occurs not because youth are predisposed to violence, but because they encounter social influences that reinforce antisocial behavior" (p. 60).

We found no gender differences in reported experiences with racial discrimination during the transition into young adulthood. Racial discrimination, however, explained an additional 5% of variance in violent behavior for young adult females and 3% more variance for young adult males after controlling for the influences of earlier adolescent risk factors. These findings are inconsistent with the generally accepted notion that African American males will experience more racial discrimination than African American females (Bobo & Suh, 1995; Forman et al., 1997; Jackson et al., 1996; Kessler et al., 1999) and, therefore, may be more prone to engage in violent behavior (Schiele, 2000). It appears that young adult African American females are just as likely as young adult African American males to both recognize racial discrimination and engage in violent behavior. More research is necessary to determine if there is something about experiencing high levels of racial discrimination that leads to violence or if those who exhibit violent behavior are more likely to attribute experiences with discrimination to race, regardless of gender.

The buffering effects of racial identity attitudes on racial discrimination and violent behavior were especially relevant for the African American males in this study. Specifically, among young adult males for whom race was less central to their identity, experience with racial discrimination was associated with engaging in more types of violent behaviors, whereas it was not associated with violence for high centrality males. This interaction was not found for females. In an Afrocentric analysis of youth violence, Schiele (2000) suggested that the internalization of a definition of manhood based on European American culture combined with the deleterious historical effects of slavery contribute to violent behaviors among African American males. Our findings may be an indication that an internalization of a strong sense of racial centrality and group affiliation may offset the stigmatization and marginalization that being African American and male in this society often engenders. Without a strong group identity based on race, African American males may feel more disrupted when experiencing what they perceive as the negative effects of being African American.

Conversely, experiences with racial discrimination may be less likely to be associated with violence when it is balanced with feelings that being Black is an important part of the male identity that contributes to feeling connected to other African Americans with similar life experiences. Interestingly, our findings for males are consistent with those of Sellers et al. (2003) who found that racial discrimination was associated with higher levels of psychological distress for people for whom race was a less central part of their identity. Thus, a strong sense of collective group identity may play an important protective role in buffering the effects of racial discrimination for both behavioral and psychosocial outcomes. Racial group affiliation as a protective mechanism has been described by Cross (1995) as a defensive oppositional identity. He suggests that a defensive oppositional identity is protective for African Americans who adopt a bicultural approach to functioning within this society. Future research should consider under what conditions racial centrality may be protective, especially during the transition into young adulthood when youth are beginning to solidify their identity as an adult in this society.

Although racial centrality appears to play different roles for males and females, the effect of experiences with racial discrimination on violent behaviors in young adulthood was moderated by public regard attitudes for both genders. Young adults who believed that others viewed Blacks favorably engaged in more violent acts when they experienced racial discrimination. Perhaps those with more favorable, idealistic views about race relations were less prepared to encounter racial discrimination and found it unexpected, confusing, and devaluing. The inconsistency between positive public regard beliefs and discriminatory experiences is consistent with the idea of cognitive dissonance (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959), which suggests that incongruence between youths' worldview/societal beliefs (in this case, that society likes my group) and their actual experiences with racial discrimination may lead to intrapsychic conflict. It is this intrapsychic conflict that can lead to stress, frustration, and perceptual distortions that could manifest itself through aggression or violence. Realistic appraisals of race relations and recognition of the potential for experiencing racial discrimination are critical in adopting effective ways to cope with

the inevitable encounters with prejudice that most African Americans experience. Bowman and Howard (1985) and Sedlacek and Brooks (1976) each found that an awareness of racial discrimination in society was related to better academic and social outcomes for African American youth. Further research is necessary to determine what constitutes optimal awareness and appraisals of race relations for healthy functioning. Future research should also assess potential mediating influences of other psychosocial variables, such as attributions about prejudice and perceived control, exposure to violence, depression, and substance use behavior to further specify mechanisms through which experiences with racial discrimination may influence violent behavior among African American young adults.

Several limitations of this study should be noted. Special consideration must be given to the social and cultural context (e.g., urban, Midwestern, largely African American) within which this research was conducted. Most importantly, the sample for this study was initially restricted to youth with grade point averages of 3.0 or below in eighth grade due to the focus of the larger study on youth at risk for school dropout and substance use. Truncating the sample in this way can threaten the internal and external validity of survey data (Berk, 1983). Several factors, however, may mitigate the problems associated with this sampling approach. First, significant numbers of youth in the sample had GPAs above 3.0 by 12th grade (Zimmerman, Caldwell, & Bernat, 2002). This suggests that a number of students improved their GPAs during high school, resulting in more heterogeneity in GPAs. Second, focusing on violent behaviors as the outcome for a sample of young adults that excluded their higher achieving schoolmates when they were in eighth grade may be helpful in understanding development among youth at greater risk for a variety of negative outcomes, especially violent behavior. Nevertheless, the results of the current study may not generalize to all urban young adults, but may be most relevant for those who were at greatest risk for negative outcomes because of lower school achievement prior to high school.

Another limitation is that the results are based on self-reported behavior. Although it is possible that respondents will be more likely to underreport violent behavior, we have limited alternatives for assessing this particular behavior. Friends, parents, or teachers may not be reliable informants for such behavior, archival records would only reflect behaviors caught by public officials (e.g., police), and observations would be difficult to obtain. The potential underreporting of violent behavior, however, would make it more difficult to detect relationships because of limited variance and the confluence of less and more violent respondents. Yet, we found both main and interaction effects. As others have noted, interaction effects are especially difficult to find (McClelland & Judd, 1993). The truncated distribution of our violent behavior measure at Wave 5 may explain why our regression models explained limited variance. Consequently, our analyses may be a conservative test of the connections between racial discrimination and racial identity with violent behavior. The fact that we found racial discrimination and racial identity interaction effects after controlling for prior violent behavior and a pertinent risk factor (i.e., ninth-grade GPA) suggests that race relations and racial identity development may be vital to understanding violent behavior among African Americans transitioning into young adulthood.

Another limitation of this study is that we used shortened versions of the racial identity subscales of the original MIBI. Consequently, the public regard measure had a relatively low reliability, whereas the measures of centrality and private regard had moderate reliabilities. No previous study has used the MIBI to investigate the role that racial identity may play in youth violent behavior. Several studies, however, have provided evidence suggesting that the MIBI is a stable, reliable and valid measure of racial identity attitudes for African American youth in studies of self-esteem and psychological well-being (Cokley & Helm, 2001; Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998; Sellers et al., 1997; Shelton & Sellers, 2000; Walsy, 2001). More research is needed to further assess the psychometric properties of the MIBI. Nevertheless, the present study is an indication of the potential usefulness of this multidimensional measure of racial identity attitudes in studies of health risk behaviors among African American youth.

Despite these limitations, preliminary conclusions from this study have potential implications for intervention at multiple levels. Several findings imply that the meaning individuals assign to different dimensions of their racial identity is important in understanding the link between experiences with racial discrimination and violent behaviors. Therefore, a strategy of "racelessness" as defined by Fordham (1988) may not be prescient in preparing African American youth to function effectively within a race conscious society. For both males and females, it appears that a realistic appraisal of the status African

Americans hold in society may be protective. Those who believe society views Blacks favorably seem to act out in the face of racial discrimination. Thus, violence prevention interventions for youth should go beyond the idea of merely enhancing ethnic pride as the core of culturally sensitive interventions for African American youth. Findings from this study suggest that increasing the salience of identifying with African Americans for males, and realistically acknowledging the existence of unfavorable views others may have about African Americans for both gender groups should be incorporated into interventions designed to help youth cope with social encounters that may be interpreted as racial discrimination. Specific skill-building activities designed to help youth blunt the negative effects of racial discrimination when it occurs must be included in such interventions.

Moving beyond the individual level is an important next step in violence prevention efforts (Kellermann, Fuqua-Whitley, Rivara, & Marcy, 1998). Because racial socialization is a vital process within most African American families (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Stevenson, 1994), the inclusion of family members in violence preventive interventions is critical to the success of conveying consistent messages about coping with race relations from the family's perspective. Involving family members directly or indirectly is an important strategy for future violence prevention interventions with African American youth. In addition, developing partnerships with communities to ask questions, generate hypotheses, and evaluate findings in conducting research and designing interventions is vital to providing new approaches to addressing youth violence related to racial identity development and racial discrimination.

The results of this study also suggest that experiences with racial discrimination that are associated with violent behavior among African American young adults have significant policy implications. National violence prevention policies should focus on reducing opportunities for discriminatory practices. The present study adds to a growing body of literature implicating the deleterious effects of racial discrimination on a variety of outcomes including physical health (Anderson, 1989; Smedley et al., 2002; Williams et al., 1999) and mental health (Clark et al., 1999; Dion, Dion, & Pak, 1992; Sellers et al., 2001). Racial discrimination appears to be one of many complex factors that help to explain why some African American youth may continue to respond to stressful events with violence in the transition into young adulthood. Attempts to address racial discrimination may be a critical component in any effort to reduce violent behavior among youth at risk for a number of negative outcomes. Lack of an acknowledgement of the existence of race-based bias and subsequent inequities for disenfranchised groups come at a cost to all Americans and can be especially harmful to the future productivity of African American young adults. Policies that reduce racial bias within society could improve the life trajectories of many African American young adults by providing more opportunities for productivity and success.

In sum, this study supports the notion that the negative effects of cultural oppression and cultural alienation must be addressed in efforts to prevent or reduce violent behavior among African Americans (Schiele, 2000). We found that experiences with racial discrimination explained violent behavior in young adults over and above earlier adolescent risk factors for violence. In addition, the significance of considering multiple dimensions of racial identity in combination with experiences with racial discrimination to explain violent behavior in African American youth transitioning into young adulthood was demonstrated. These findings are consistent with the ecological model that suggests that youth violence is a reflection of individual psychosocial characteristics, social influences, and societal constraints (Guerra et al., 1995; Paschall & Hubbard, 1998). Taken together, study findings implicate processes at the individual, interpersonal, and societal levels in explaining violence, but the overall conclusion appears simple. That is, the social construction of race and the meaning individuals assign to race-relations matters in explaining acts of violence among African American young adults.

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