

# The Role of Coping in the Relationship Between Perceived Racism and Racism-Related Stress for Asian Americans: Gender Differences

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On the basis of stress and coping theory, the authors examined coping as a mediator of the relationship between perceptions of racism and racism-related stress with a sample of Asian American college students ( $N = 336$ ). Results indicated that coping mediated the relationship between racism and racism-related stress differentially by gender. The more that men perceived racism, the more likely they were to use support-seeking coping strategies that were associated with higher levels of racism-related stress. The more that women perceived racism, the more they used active coping strategies that were associated with higher levels of racism-related stress. The findings demonstrate how coping with racism differs for Asian Americans on the basis of gender.

*Keywords:* Asian Americans, racism, coping, racism-related stress

Stress theory posits a relationship between stress and a variety of mental and physical outcomes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Racism has been argued to be a significant source of chronic stress for racial minorities (Dion, 2002). In addition, the stress associated with racism is thought to negatively impact an individual's well-being (Harrell, 2000). Basing her model of racism-related stress on the long tradition of stress theory, Harrell (2000) proposed that negative psychological and physiological outcomes result when an individual is unable to respond to direct or indirect experiences of racism events. In fact, several studies have indicated a significant relationship between stressors such as perceived discrimination and psychological problems among Asian Americans. Using a correlational design, Asamen and Berry (1987) found that perceived racism is negatively related to self-concept. In an experimental study, Boeckmann and Liew (2002) found that Asian American participants who were exposed to hate speech directed toward their own racial group reported lower levels of collective self-esteem than did individuals exposed to two other conditions. Recent studies have extended those findings by seeking to understand the role of intervening variables in the relationship between racism experiences and psychological problems (e.g., Lee, 2003, 2005). However, research regarding racism experiences of Asian Americans remains scant. In particular, the degree to which experiences with racism are associated with racism-related stress among Asian Americans has not yet been explored.

One direction for racism research to take is to examine the relationship of racism with racism-related stress that takes into account the role of coping. According to stress theory, the coping process employed is critical in the relationship between the experience and appraisal of the threatening event and subsequent feelings of event-related stress and psychopathology (Lazarus, 1990). Coping strategies are hypothesized to mediate the relationship between stress and adjustment problems (Lazarus, 1990; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Our purpose in this present study was to examine the mediating role of coping in the relationship between the perception of racism and racism-related stress among Asian American college students.

## Racism and Psychological Problems

Although much of the racism research has explored the racism-related experiences of African Americans, scholars have also begun to study how Asian Americans are psychologically impacted by race-based discrimination. Asian Americans' experience of racism is based on how physical and linguistic differences are perceived and evaluated by the dominant culture and other minority groups (Yee, Huang, & Lew, 1998) and economic forces that heighten fears of "yellow domination" (Takaki, 1998). One result of these perceptions has been the historical and persistent subordination and marginalization of Asian Americans throughout the presence of this group in the United States (see Chan, 1991). Racism can occur at various levels, including institutional (e.g., discriminatory laws), societal (e.g., racial hate groups), and individual (e.g., racial stereotyping by an individual) levels (Sue, 2005). Thus, racism can be an active or passive act that serves to subordinate one group while elevating another.

Asian Americans, like other U.S. racial minorities, encounter racism (Wu, 2002). However, little is known about their intrapsychic experience of racism. In general, research suggests that Asian Americans are negatively affected by racism. Several studies have indicated an association between experiences with racism and lower levels of self-concept among Japanese Americans (Asamen

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This work was supported by a grant from the National Institutes of Health's Minority Research Infrastructure Support Program. We would like to express our gratitude to our research assistants Har Tan, Cathryn Fabian, and Rajani Venkatraman for their invaluable support.

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& Berry, 1987) and higher levels of psychological distress and academic problems among Chinese adolescents (Chiu & Ring, 1998). A recent longitudinal study found that perceived racial discrimination by adults and peers predicted lower self-esteem and greater depression for Asian American youth (Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006). Among Chinese American adults, the perception of racism was significantly related to higher levels of psychological distress (Alvarez, Sanematsu, Woo, Espinueva, & Kongthong, 2006). Racism-related stress also has been found to be positively related to problems with career development, interpersonal problems, and self-esteem (Liang & Fassinger, in press). Given that not all individuals are uniformly impacted by racism experiences, however, there is a need to understand the influence of moderating and mediating variables on racism experiences.

### The Stress Process and Racism-Related Stress

The transactional life stress model proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) is useful for understanding differences in the way people respond psychologically to racism experiences. The authors argued that the experience of stress is a result of cognitive appraisals of the stressor or event and the effectiveness of the coping strategies employed. Thus, *stress* is a behavioral, physical, or cognitive outcome associated with an individual's inability to access personal or social resources to respond to an event that has been appraised to be harmful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pearlin, 1989). Stress-inducing events may take the form of traumatic events, daily hassles, or chronic strains. Using Lazarus and Folkman's conceptualization of stress, Harrell (2000) proposed that racism is one form of chronic stressor that affects the well-being of racial minorities through racism-related stress and other mediators. Thus, racism or perceived discrimination is differentiated from racism-related stress in that the former may precede the latter.

According to Lazarus (1990), *coping* mediates the relationship between a stressor and stress. Coping has been defined as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Thus, coping is a mechanism by which individuals understand, reframe, or react to the experience of the event. The manner in which an individual copes with that event will, in turn, determine whether he or she is stressed by the experience. For instance, an Asian American college student may hear about or directly witness a race-based discriminatory event, but the level of stress that individual experiences because of the event is determined by how he or she copes with the stressor.

One way to distinguish the coping efforts individuals employ is to categorize them as either *problem-focused* or *emotion-focused* strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused strategies are concerned with behaviors aimed at eliminating the source of stress. For instance, individuals engaging in problem-focused strategies may take direct action, plan, screen out other activities, and even delay action (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). Thus, Asian Americans using a problem-focused approach to dealing with racism experiences may directly confront the offending individual(s) or institutions or may seek ways to heighten awareness of racism among their peers or community. Emotion-focused strategies, on the other hand, are aimed at reducing the emotional impact of an event. Carver and his colleagues (1989) explained that

behaviors typical of emotion-focused strategies involve seeking emotional support. As such, an Asian American college student using an emotion-focused approach may seek out a support group for Asian Americans or other people of color at his or her college counseling center. Billings and Moos (1984) proposed that *avoidance coping* is a third strategy by which people respond to stressful events. Avoidance coping involves trying to forget the stressful event or by engaging in substance use to escape the problem. In essence, avoidance coping consists of behaviors in which the individual does not directly address the problem and engages in activities that lead to withdrawal from day-to-day activities. When it concerns an Asian American having experienced racism, an individual using avoidance strategies may choose to isolate him- or herself from others or use mind-altering substances to forget the event.

The mediational role of coping for a variety of relationships has been examined in a wide area of research. In a study involving younger and older European American adults, Folkman and Lazarus (1988) found that many aspects of coping mediated the relationship between feelings of fearfulness, anger, confidence, and happiness prior to and after a stressful event for both the younger and older sample. Coping also has been demonstrated to be a mediator in the relationships between community violence and psychological problems. For instance, Dempsey (2002) found that negative coping (i.e., avoidance, aggression, violence) used by African American youth mediated the relationship between exposure to community violence and depression, anxiety, and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder. She found higher levels of all three outcomes for individuals who used these negative coping strategies. The mediating role of coping in the relationship between discrimination and healthy behaviors also has been examined. In one such study, Bianchi, Zea, Poppen, Reisen, and Echeverry (2004) found that active coping mediated the relationship between the experience of racism and antigay discrimination and healthy behavioral habits among HIV-positive Latino gay men. With respect to Asian Americans, Lee & Liu (2001) used a stress-coping framework to examine the mediating effects of indirect coping in the relationship between the intergenerational family conflict and psychological distress. They found that indirect coping strategies (e.g., forbearance, self-distraction) mediated the effects of intergenerational family conflict on psychological distress such that the intergenerational family conflict resulted in more use of indirect coping strategies, which, in turn, led to higher levels of distress. Across these studies, those who used more active coping strategies engaged in more healthy behaviors after experiencing a stressor. In sum, the stress-coping framework has been found to be useful across populations and issues, and coping styles have been found to mediate relationships in positive and negative fashions. Furthermore, avoidance strategies and emotion-focused strategies are less effective in coping with stressors than are active or problem-focused strategies.

The current direction of Asian American racism research has been to examine the moderating, rather than mediating, effects of coping against perceived racial discrimination. In a study of adult Southeast Asian refugees in Canada, Noh, Beiser, Kaspar, Hou, and Rummens (1999) found that emotion-focused, but not problem-focused, strategies attenuated the effects of discrimination on depression. In another study of adult Korean immigrants residing in Toronto, Canada, Noh and Kaspar (2003) found that

both problem-focused strategies (e.g., personal confrontations) and emotion-focused strategies moderated the relationship between perceived discrimination and depression. However, problem-focused strategies attenuated negative effects, whereas emotion-focused strategies exacerbated negative effects. In one final study involving Asian American college students, Yoo and Lee (2005) found that the use of cognitive restructuring diminished the effects of perceived racial discrimination on life satisfaction and positive affect for Asian Americans who were highly ethnic identified. These studies suggest that coping strategies are important moderators in understanding the relationship between racism and psychological functioning. By examining the moderating effects of coping strategies, however, these studies did not examine the role of coping as a mediator that is posited by stress-coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

In studying the potential for coping strategies as a mediator in the relationship between stressor and the experience of stress, coping strategies are understood to be accessed and used as a function of the stressor, which, in turn, influence the outcome. Alternatively, examinations of coping as a moderator suggest that coping strategies emerge independently from an experience of a stressor to influence the relationship between the stressful event and outcome. As Frazier, Tix, and Barron (2004) observed, "whereas moderators address 'when' or 'for whom' a predictor is more strongly related to an outcome, mediators establish 'how' or 'why' one variable predicts or causes an outcome variable" (p. 116). In effect, a mediation model provides insights into the underlying causal effect of coping. Thus, there is a need to examine a theoretically grounded model in which coping mediates the effects of a racially stressful event.

### Coping and Gender

Several researchers have found gender differences in the use of coping strategies. For instance, in developing their measure of multidimensional coping, Carver et al. (1989) found that women were more likely than men to use emotional and instrumental support as well as the ventilation of emotions. In that study, men also were found to resort to alcohol use more than women do. In another study examining coping and racial discrimination among African Americans, Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, and Cancelli (2000) found that men and women differed such that women sought social support more than men did. In one early study examining the coping styles of Asian Americans, Kuo (1995) found that for individuals who have experienced discrimination as well as those who have not, emotion-focused strategies were used more than problem-focused strategies. In that study, Kuo also found that women, when compared with men, reported using more problem-focused strategies, particularly seeking advice. As a descriptive study, Kuo did not examine the relationships between coping and Asian Americans' experiences with racism and their psychological outcomes. Therefore, in the current study, we sought to advance this body of research by examining both the mediating role of coping and the role of gender in regard to Asian Americans' perceptions of racism.

### Research Questions, Hypotheses, and Variables

Our main purpose in the present study was to examine whether coping styles mediate the relationship between perceptions of

racism and racism-related stress for men and for women. Given the differences in coping strategies used by men and women, we conducted separate analyses for each of these two groups. In short, we sought to answer the following questions: (a) Does coping mediate the relationship between perceived racism and racism-related stress? (b) Does gender influence the relationship between coping, perceived racism, and racism-related stress? On the basis of the literature reviewed, we predicted that perceived racism would be related to racism-related stress and that coping would serve as a mediator in that relationship. On the basis of previous coping research, we also expected to find that men and women would use different coping strategies and that those differences would influence the relationship between coping, racism, and racism-related stress. As a correlational study, we recognize that alternative models may be equally possible in describing the relationships between the variables under investigation. For instance, it is conceivable that racism-related stress mediates the use of coping strategies. However, as an exploratory and initial study in this area, we have chosen to focus on a theoretically grounded model of coping as a mediator (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The dependent variable of the study was racism-related stress, which was operationalized with the use of the Asian American Racism-Related Stress Index (AARRSI; Liang, Li, & Kim, 2004). The measure assesses the degree to which individuals are stressed or bothered by experiences with racism that are unique to Asian Americans. The independent variable, racism, was assessed through the Daily Life Experiences subscale of the Racial and Life Experiences Scales (RALES; Harrell, 1997). This subscale measures the perception of daily race-based microaggressions. The mediator variable, coping, was assessed through the use of the COPE Inventory (Carver et al., 1989). Specifically, for the purposes of this study, we examined active, avoidant, and support-seeking and emotional ventilation coping strategies.

## Method

### Participants

An a priori power analysis indicated that 55 participants were needed to detect an effect size of .15 with an 80% probability at an alpha level of .05. The sample consisted of 336 undergraduate students recruited from two universities, one on the West Coast ( $n = 254$ ) and one on the East Coast ( $n = 82$ ). The participants' overall mean age was 19.8 years ( $SD = 2.64$ ), with 132 men and 204 women. In terms of ethnicity, the sample consisted of Chinese (40.8%), Pilipino (24.7%), Korean (9.2%), Vietnamese (5.1%), Indian (4.5%), multiethnic (3.3%), Japanese (3.0), and other (e.g., Bangladeshi and Lao representing 8%, with Cambodian and Thai each representing less than 1% of the sample) participants. Participants' median length of residence in the United States was 15.7 years ( $SD = 5.95$ ), and they were born primarily in the United States (62.2%) or Asia (36.3%). The majority of participants described themselves as middle class (55%), followed by upper middle and higher (25%), lower middle (11.7%), and lower (8.3%).

### Measures

*Demographic sheet.* The demographic sheet assessed background information about participants and their parents (e.g., age,

gender, generational status, educational level, and length of residence in the United States).

**RALES.** The RALES (Harrell, 1997) is a battery of instruments developed to measure multiple dimensions of an individual's perceptions of racism and racial socialization. For the current study, we used the Daily Life Experiences subscale. This scale consists of 20 items measuring one's perceptions of racial micro-aggressions in the past year, such as "being treated rudely or disrespectfully" and "being ignored, overlooked, or not given services (in a restaurant, store)." The 6-point Likert-type response scale ranges from 0 (*never*) to 5 (*once a week or more*). Mean scores were calculated so that a higher score indicated a greater frequency of racism. In multiracial validation samples that included Asian Americans, Harrell, Merchant, and Young (1997) reported reliability coefficients of .89 to .94. In the current study, the reliability coefficient was .94.

**AARRSI.** The AARRSI (Liang et al., 2004) consists of 29 items divided into three subscales designed to assess Asian Americans' degree of racism-related stress. The Sociohistorical Racism subscale measures the amount of stress resulting from their awareness of historical and institutional racism (e.g., "You notice that U.S. history books offer no information of the contributions of Asian Americans"). The General Racism subscale assesses stress associated with one's experiences with stereotypes of Asian Americans (e.g., "Someone tells you that they heard that there is a gene that makes Asians smart"). The Perpetual Foreigner Racism subscale measures the stress related to the perception that all Asian Americans are immigrants and nonnative "Americans" (e.g., "You are asked where you are really from"). Participants were asked to rate the level of stress associated with each racial experience using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*this event never happened to me or someone I know*) to 5 (*this event happened and I was extremely stressed*). The three subscales were highly intercorrelated (ranging from .70 to .80,  $p < .001$ ); therefore, we used only the mean score for the overall scale in the current study such that a higher score indicated a higher level of racism-related stress.

Validity for the instrument was established through positive correlations with the Minority Status Stress Scale (Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993), Schedule of Racist Events (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996), Perceived Racism Scale (McNeilly et al., 1996), and the Cultural Mistrust Inventory (Terrell & Terrell, 1981). In another study involving Asian American college students, Liang and Fassinger (in press) found significant positive relationships between the AARRSI and self-esteem problems, career problems, and interpersonal problems. In validation studies with Asian American college samples, Liang et al. (2004) reported reliability coefficients ranging from .90 to .95 for the overall scale. In the current study, the reliability coefficient was .92.

**COPE Inventory.** The COPE Inventory (Carver et al., 1989) consists of 60 items designed to measure how individuals cope with stressful events. The original scale comprises 15 subscales addressing conceptually distinct ways of coping. In the interest of parsimony, Carver (2006) has recommended that researchers conduct a second-order factor analysis on the basis of the obtained sample in light of the different higher order factors that may emerge across samples. With this current sample, the analysis yielded three conceptually meaningful factors similar to what has been found in the literature (Carver et al., 1989; Litman, 2005). The factors in this study are Active, with 20 items that examined

problem-focused styles of coping; Avoidance, with 20 items that assessed styles of coping characterized by denial and disengagement; and Support Seeking and Emotion Ventilation, with 12 items that measured emotion-focused styles of coping.<sup>1</sup>

Participants were asked how they coped when they experienced a racially stressful event. The 4-point Likert-type response scale ranged from 1 (*I usually don't do this at all*) to 4 (*I usually do this a lot*). Mean scores were calculated so that a higher score indicated higher use of the particular coping strategy. In samples of college students, the internal consistency coefficients of the subscales ranged from .45 to .92. The reliability coefficients of the second-order factors were not reported by Carver et al. (1989); however, in the current study, the reliability coefficients for active coping, avoidant coping, and support-seeking coping were .91, .87, and .90, respectively.

### Procedure

Participants were recruited through direct solicitation during undergraduate psychology courses as part of a larger study on Asian Americans' experiences with racism. Students who agreed to participate received the questionnaires and a consent form, indicating that participation was voluntary and confidential. As an inducement, students were informed that completion of the questionnaires fulfilled course requirements. Participants completed the questionnaires outside of class and were asked to return both the consent forms and the questionnaires during the following class period. After returning the completed questionnaire packets, all students received a written debriefing about the underlying goals and hypotheses of the study. Each university's human subjects committee approved all procedures.

### Results

Before analyses were conducted, we checked for missing data. There were no missing data on any of the main study variables with the exception of racism-related stress (AARRSI). The AARRSI had one case of missing data. Because of the small amount of missing data, we simply deleted this case from analyses including the AARRSI.

Preliminary analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between demographic variables (i.e., gender, ethnicity, location, socioeconomic status, age, length of residency) and the study variables. Bivariate correlational analyses were conducted for ordinal variables, and independent *t* tests or one-way analyses of

<sup>1</sup> Studies on the dimensionality of the COPE Inventory have generally found three to four higher order factors: problem-focused coping, avoidance, support seeking, and emotion focused (Litman, 2005). For the current study, second-order factor analysis revealed that the higher order coping factors were made up of the following subscales: Factor 1 (active, planning, suppression of competing activities, restraint, and positive reinterpretation), Factor 2 (behavioral disengagement, mental disengagement, alcohol-drug disengagement, denial, and humor), and Factor 3 (seeking social support for emotional reasons, focus on and venting emotions, and seeking social support for instrumental reasons). Details of the second-order factor analysis can be obtained from Alvin N. Alvarez (Department of Counseling, San Francisco University, Burk Hall 524, 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94132. E-mail: aalvarez@sfsu.edu) upon request.



variance were conducted with categorical variables. No significant relationships were found between the study variables and participants' age or length of residency in the United States. With respect to gender, men predominantly used active coping ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = .57$ ), followed by support-seeking ( $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = .61$ ) and avoidance coping ( $M = 1.84$ ,  $SD = .46$ ) strategies. Women predominantly used support-seeking ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = .69$ ), followed by active ( $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = .53$ ) and avoidance coping ( $M = 1.78$ ,  $SD = .40$ ) strategies. Moreover, the preliminary analyses indicated that women ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = .69$ ) were more likely than men ( $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = .61$ ) to use support seeking as a form of coping with racism,  $t(332) = -3.04$ ,  $p < .01$ . Finally, the analyses also indicated,  $t(216) = 2.63$ ,  $p < .01$ , that men ( $M = 1.25$ ,  $SD = .97$ ) were more likely to report a higher frequency of racism compared with women ( $M = 0.99$ ,  $SD = .70$ ).

In regard to ethnicity, participants' ethnicity was aggregated into three categories: Chinese ( $n = 136$ ), Pilipino ( $n = 82$ ), and other Asian ( $n = 116$ ). The results indicated that there were main effects for ethnicity with respect to participants' perceptions of racism,  $F(2, 331) = 5.46$ ,  $p < .01$ , their degree of racism-related stress,  $F(2, 331) = 5.51$ ,  $p < .01$ , and their use of active coping strategies,  $F(2, 331) = 7.67$ ,  $p < .01$ . Specifically, Pilipinos ( $M = 1.35$ ,  $SD = .87$ ) reported a higher frequency of racism than did either Chinese ( $M = 1.01$ ,  $SD = .80$ ) or other Asian ( $M = 1.01$ ,  $SD = .79$ ) participants. Moreover, Chinese participants ( $M = 2.13$ ,  $SD = .65$ ) were more likely to report lower levels of racism-related stress than were either Pilipinos ( $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = .72$ ) or other Asian ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = .69$ ) participants. Finally, Chinese participants ( $M = 2.24$ ,  $SD = .53$ ) were less likely to use active coping strategies in dealing with racism than were either Pilipino ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = .57$ ) or other Asian ( $M = 2.47$ ,  $SD = .53$ ) participants.

With respect to location, the results,  $t(185) = 2.75$ ,  $p < .01$ , indicated that West Coast participants ( $M = 1.15$ ,  $SD = .90$ ) reported a higher frequency of racism than did East Coast participants ( $M = 0.91$ ,  $SD = .64$ ). In addition, East Coast participants ( $M = 2.57$ ,  $SD = .51$ ), relative to West Coast participants ( $M = 2.32$ ,  $SD = .55$ ), were more likely to use active coping strategies,  $t(332) = -3.71$ ,  $p < .001$ . In terms of socioeconomic status, a main effect for socioeconomic status was found in terms of participants' racism-related stress,  $F(3, 317) = 4.40$ ,  $p < .01$ , such that participants who described themselves as upper middle class or higher ( $M = 2.47$ ,  $SD = .74$ ) reported higher levels of racism-related stress than did middle class ( $M = 2.15$ ,  $SD = .64$ ) participants. Given these significant relationships, we treated gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and location as control variables in subsequent analyses.

Bivariate correlations were also conducted to assess the relationships among the main study variables, namely, perceived racism, the three coping strategies, and racism-related stress. The main study variables were positively correlated with one another such that greater perceived racism was related to higher use of the three coping strategies and greater racism-related stress (see Table 1).

### Mediational Analyses

Using three multiple regression analyses, we used four steps to determine whether coping strategies mediated the relationship between perceptions of racism and participants' racism-related stress (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Frazier et al., 2004). Specifically,

Table 1  
*Bivariate Correlations and Descriptives Among Main Study Variables (N = 336)*

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Racism	—				
2. Active	.20 <sup>a</sup>	—			
3. Avoidance	.39 <sup>a</sup>	.45 <sup>a</sup>	—		
4. Support seeking	.24 <sup>a</sup>	.57 <sup>a</sup>	.32 <sup>a</sup>	—	
5. Racism-related stress	.54 <sup>a</sup>	.31 <sup>a</sup>	.22 <sup>a</sup>	.30 <sup>a</sup>	—
<i>M</i>	1.09	2.38	1.80	2.49	2.28
<i>SD</i>	0.82	0.55	0.42	0.67	0.70
Minimum	0.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Maximum	4.53	3.80	3.50	4.00	4.86
Response scale	1–5	1–4	1–4	1–4	0–5

Note. Active, avoidance, and support seeking are from the COPE Inventory.

<sup>a</sup> Bonferroni correction set at significance level  $p < .001$ .

mediation exists if (a) in Step 1, perceptions of racism significantly predict racism-related stress; (b) in Step 2, perceptions of racism significantly predict coping strategies; (c) in Step 3, coping strategies are significant predictors of racism-related stress above and beyond what was accounted for by perceptions of racism; and (d) in Step 4, the examination of the beta weights indicates that a formerly significant relationship between perceptions of racism and racism-related stress either disappears, as is the case in full mediation, or is reduced, as is the case in partial mediation. To control for family-wise Type I error at each step of the mediation analyses, we adjusted the significance level with a Bonferroni correction.

### Mediation for Men

In Step 1 of the mediational analyses for men ( $n = 132$ ),<sup>2</sup> we conducted a hierarchical multiple regression analysis using perceptions of racism to predict participants' racism-related stress (Table 2). The results indicated that perceptions of racism significantly predicted participants' racism-related stress, and, more specifically, that an increase in participants' perceptions of racism was associated with higher levels of racism-related stress.

In Step 2 of the mediational analyses, we conducted three separate hierarchical multiple regression analyses with Bonferroni-adjusted significance levels set at  $p < .017$  (Table 3). In this step, we used perceptions of racism to predict participants' coping strategies. After controlling for the effects due to demographic control variables, we found perceptions of racism to be significant predictors of both avoidance and support-seeking coping strategies. The examination of the beta weights in the respective regres-

<sup>2</sup> There were a handful of outliers on several of the main study variables (in total, seven cases: four men, three women). To determine whether the outliers had an undue impact on the results, we deleted these seven cases and reran the mediational analyses for men and women separately. The results did not change significantly (e.g., the valence and significance of beta coefficients). Thus, because the seven cases had scores that were still within the range of plausible responses, and we had no reason to assume that they were from a significantly different population, the results we report are based on the entire sample.

**Table 2**  
*Hierarchical Regression Analyses Using Perception of Racism and Coping Strategies to Predict Racism-Related Stress With Men (n = 132) and Women (n = 204)*

Step and variable	B	SE B	β	ΔR <sup>2</sup>	Total R <sup>2</sup>
Racism and active coping—men					
Step 1—covariates					.03
Step 2				.30***	.33***
Racism	.39	.05	.56***		
Racism and avoidance coping—men					
Step 1—covariates					.03
Step 2				.30***	.33***
Racism	.39	.05	.56***		
Step 3				.00	.33***
Racism	.40	.06	.56***		
Avoidance	-.02	.12	-.01		
Racism and support-seeking coping—men					
Step 1—covariates					.03
Step 2				.30***	.33***
Racism	.39	.05	.56***		
Step 3				.05**	.38***
Racism	.35	.05	.50***		
Support	.27	.08	.24**		
Racism and active coping—women					
Step 1—covariates					.08**
Step 2				.29***	.37***
Racism	.57	.06	.55***		
Step 3				.03*	.40***
Racism	.51	.06	.51***		
Active	.24	.08	.18**		
Racism and avoidance coping—women					
Step 1—covariates					.08**
Step 2				.29***	.37***
Racism	.57	.06	.55***		
Step 3				.00	.37***
Racism	.55	.07	.53***		
Avoidance	.09	.11	.05		
Racism and support-seeking coping—women					
Step 1—covariates					.08**
Step 2				.29***	.37***
Racism	.57	.06	.55***		
Step 3				.00	.38***
Racism	.54	.07	.52***		
Support	.08	.07	.08		

*Note.* Step 1 involves addition of covariates (e.g., socioeconomic status, location, and ethnicity). Step 2 involves addition of perceptions of racism. Step 3 involves addition of coping strategies.  
\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

sion equations further indicated that perceptions of racism were significantly and positively related to the use of both avoidance and support-seeking coping. Perceptions of racism did not significantly predict the use of active coping strategies; therefore, this strategy was not included in Step 3 of the mediational analyses.

Hence, Step 2 of the mediational analyses was satisfied for two of three of the coping strategies.

In Step 3 of the mediational analyses, we conducted two separate hierarchical multiple regression analyses using both perceptions of racism and coping strategies to predict participants' racism-related stress (Table 2). The Bonferroni-adjusted significance level was set at  $p < .025$ . The results indicated that support-seeking coping strategies significantly predicted participants' racism-related stress above and beyond what was accounted for by demographic control variables and perceptions of racism. In Step 4, evidence of partial mediation was demonstrated by the reduction in the beta weights associated with perceptions of racism. Furthermore, the indirect relationship between perceptions of racism and racism-related stress as mediated by support-seeking coping strategies was found to be significant, Sobel's statistic = 2.25,  $p < .05$ . Participants' avoidance coping strategies did not significantly and uniquely predict racism-related stress.

**Table 3**  
*Hierarchical Regression Analyses Using Perceptions of Racism to Predict Coping Strategies With Men (n = 132) and Women (n = 204)*

Step and variable	B	SE B	β	ΔR <sup>2</sup>	Total R <sup>2</sup>
Dependent variable: Active coping—men					
Step 1—covariates					.11**
Step 2				.03*	.14**
Racism	.11	.05	.19*		
Dependent variable: Avoidance coping—men					
Step 1—covariates					.02
Step 2				.16***	.19***
Racism	.19	.04	.41***		
Dependent variable: Support-seeking coping—men					
Step 1—covariates					.02
Step 2				.07***	.09*
Racism	.17	.06	.27**		
Dependent variable: Active coping—women					
Step 1—covariates					.06*
Step 2				.07***	.13***
Racism	.21	.06	.27***		
Dependent variable: Avoidance coping—women					
Step 1—covariates					.01
Step 2				.11***	.12***
Racism	.21	.04	.35***		
Dependent variable: Support-seeking coping—women					
Step 1—covariates					.06*
Step 2				.12***	.18***
Racism	.37	.07	.36***		

*Note.* Step 1 involves addition of covariates (e.g., socioeconomic status, location, and ethnicity). Step 2 involves addition of perception of racism.  
\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

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### Mediation for Women

To test Step 1 of the mediational analyses for women ( $n = 204$ ), we conducted a hierarchical multiple regression analysis with demographic control variables entered in the first step and perceptions of racism entered in the second step (Table 2). The dependent variable was participants' racism-related stress. The analysis indicated that women's perceptions of racism were significantly and positively related to racism-related stress after controlling for the effects due to demographic control variables.

In Step 2, we conducted three hierarchical multiple regression analyses to examine the relationship between perceptions of racism and coping strategies (Table 3). To control for family-wise Type I error, we set the significance level for these three analyses at  $p < .017$ . The results indicated that perceptions of racism were significantly and positively related to participants' use of all three coping strategies (i.e., active, avoidance, and support seeking). Hence, Step 2 in the mediational analyses was satisfied for all three coping strategies.

To test Step 3 of the mediational analyses, we conducted three separate hierarchical multiple regressions with racism-related stress as the dependent variable and the combination of both perceptions of racism and coping strategies as the predictors (Table 2). The variables were entered in the following order: (a) demographic control variables, (b) perceptions of racism, and (c) coping strategies. Participants' active coping strategies significantly predicted their racism-related stress after controlling for the effects resulting from the demographic control variables and perceptions of racism. In Step 4, an examination of the beta weights indicated that active coping strategies partially mediated the relationship between perceptions of racism and racism-related stress. Furthermore, the mediating effect of active coping was found to be significant, Sobel's statistic = 2.13,  $p < .05$ . In effect, the more women perceived racism, the more likely they were to use active coping strategies, which, in turn, resulted in higher levels of racism-related stress. Avoidance and support-seeking coping strategies were not found to be significant and unique predictors of racism-related stress.

### Discussion

Over the past decade, researchers have examined the influence of racism on psychological well-being and adjustment problems. More recently, researchers have begun to examine the intervening variables in those relationships. The majority of those researchers have examined the role of coping as a moderator variable (e.g., Noh & Kaspar, 2003; Noh et al., 1999). At the time of this study, no researchers had investigated the role of coping as a mediator of Asian Americans' experiences with racism. Grounded in racism research and stress-coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), we examined the role of coping in mediating the relationship between the perception of racism and level of racism-related stress among Asian Americans. In addition, because previous racism-related studies have indicated differential use of coping styles on the basis of gender (Kuo, 1995), we examined how coping style explains the relationship between racism and racism-related stress for men and women separately.

Data from preliminary analyses indicated several significant findings. First, these results indicate that men are more likely to

report having experienced racism. Moreover, women are more likely to use support-seeking coping than are men. Both findings are consistent with previous research. For instance, Kuo (1995) found that men experienced greater levels of discrimination and women used advice-seeking strategies more than men did. These findings suggest that women may be more comfortable than men are in disclosing their feelings and seeking advice from others about their experiences with racism. Preliminary analyses also indicated ethnic group effects on the use of coping strategies and perceptions of racism. Specifically, Chinese Americans were found to use active coping strategies less than were Filipinos and other Asian Americans. This result is consistent with Kuo's finding that Chinese respondents reported lower levels of problem-focused strategies than did Filipino, Japanese, and Korean participants. Similar to Kuo, we also found that Filipinos reported more frequent encounters with racism than did other Asian ethnic groups. Preliminary analyses also indicated that West Coast participants perceived more experiences with racism and less use of active coping than did their East Coast counterparts. This finding suggests that geographic location may play an important role in the racial experiences of Asian Americans. These differences warrant further investigation.

Relationships between perceptions of racism, coping strategies, and racism-related stress had to be established before the mediational analyses could be conducted. Results for both men and women indicate that even after controlling for demographic variables, perceiving racism predicted racism-related stress. Thus, the perception of having experienced racism explains higher levels of racism-related stress. This finding is consistent with theoretical propositions suggesting that racism is a source of stress for racial minorities (Dion, 2002; Harrell, 2000). In contrast to the presumed social and economic successes of Asian Americans, the current study underscores both the reality of racism and its adverse psychological impact on members of this community.

Consistent with previous research examining the coping styles of Asian American men and women experiencing discrimination (Kuo, 1995), these current analyses indicate differential relationships between perceptions of racism and coping strategies. Although perceiving racism was found to predict all three forms of coping strategies for women, only avoidance and support-seeking coping strategies were found to be significantly predicted by perceptions of racism among men. These findings suggest that racism may elicit different forms of coping in men and women, thereby providing additional support for conducting separate mediational analyses for the men and women in the sample.

Partial support for the mediational model proposed in the stress-coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) is provided by both sets of gender-specific analyses. Thus, not only does perceived racism directly affect racism-related stress, it appears that this relationship is partly based on how individuals cope with racism. Specifically, mediational analyses involving men indicated that support-seeking coping behaviors explain the relationship between perceiving racism and racism-related stress such that experiences with racism lead Asian American men to seek social support, which then leads to increased levels of racism-related stress. This finding is counterintuitive and contrary to our expectations. In general, research indicates that having access to and using social support networks are effective strategies for adjusting positively to negative life experiences. However, social support also has been found to have

detrimental impacts on individuals (see Rudkin, 2003). It may be that the social support sought is not effective in helping individuals cope with racism. For instance, an individual may be told by his or her support group to avoid certain groups of people or places as a way to cope with the experience. Alternatively, given Kuo's (1995) findings that Asian Americans' primary reaction to racism is to ignore or trivialize the events, it may be that the networks of social support may silence or discount the individual who has experienced race-based discrimination. Thus, rather than learning to cope effectively with racism, it is conceivable that social supports may lead individuals to engage in avoidance behaviors or to invalidate their own experiences with racism. Hence, researchers may need to understand not only support seeking per se but the nature of the support that one receives as well. That is, future studies may need to examine the accessibility, type, and quality of social support that Asian Americans use in coping, thereby providing more clarity about the mediational role of support seeking in the relationship between perceptions of racism and racism-related stress.

Mediational analyses involving women in the sample indicate that the use of active coping behaviors explains the relationship between perceiving racism and racism-related stress, that is, Asian American women's experiences with racism are associated with the use of active coping strategies, which then leads to increased levels of racism-related stress. Specifically, the findings of this current study suggest that the more Asian American women use active coping strategies, the higher their levels of stress. This finding is inconsistent with theoretical assertions of mediation. Although speculative, it may be that active coping strategies result in individuals spending time and cognitive resources to address or actively suppress feelings associated with an experience with racism. It could be that this cognitive process, in which one evaluates methods to address the experience of racism, may result in individuals experiencing higher levels of racism-related stress.

This study also yields several null findings that are worth noting. For instance, neither active nor avoidance coping strategies served to mediate the relationship between perceived racism and racism-related stress for men. For women, both support-seeking and avoidance coping strategies failed to mediate that relationship. Folkman (2001) noted that the inherently dynamic and variable nature of coping poses a significant challenge in detecting a clear relationship between coping and a particular health outcome. Particularly in regard to racism, it stands to reason that the nature of the racist event as well as how an individual copes with a particular event may differ from one encounter to another. For instance, an individual's choice of coping strategy and the stress resulting from a microaggression by a child in one's neighborhood will most likely differ from a microaggression from one's direct supervisor. Hence, contextual variations in both the nature of racism and one's choice of coping may complicate the goal of determining clear associations between racism, coping, and racism-related stress. Subsequently, until additional research demonstrates a clearer linkage between these constructs, Frazier et al. (2004) have suggested that it may be difficult to detect mediational relationships.

Moreover, the null results may also reflect insufficient power for the analyses that were conducted. Although a priori power analyses suggested that the overall sample provided sufficient power for the regression analyses, Frazier et al. (2004) have noted that mediation analyses using Baron and Kenny's (1986) procedures

often underestimate issues of power. Consequently, given the relatively small effect sizes in the variables under investigation, particularly in Step 3 of the mediational analyses, future studies will need to attend to power and sample size considerations.

Several strengths are notable of this current study. First, this study is grounded in theory and extends existing racism literature in psychology. Specifically, we used a well-established theory to test the mediational role of coping strategies on the relationship between perceived racism and racism-related stress. At the time of this study, we identified few published Asian American-related racism-coping studies. In engaging in this inquiry, the role of coping is better understood. Second, this study contributes uniquely to this area of research by examining the mediational role of coping separately for Asian American women and men. Developing this knowledge base offers psychologists and counselors a way to understand how racism impacts Asian Americans differently on the basis of gender. Third, by using two samples of Asian Americans from the East and West Coasts of the United States, this study's findings are more generalizable.

Several limitations to this study are noteworthy. First, although the sample was composed of a diverse group of Asian Americans from two institutions, all participants were college students. Therefore, the findings of this study may not be generalizable to non-college students. Second, nearly two thirds of the sample were either Pilipino or Chinese. Thus, the results of this study must be read with caution. The experiences of other Asian Americans may have been masked by the large proportion of Pilipino and Chinese participants. Other Asian ethnic Americans may have different experiences with racism or use different coping strategies. To address this limitation, future researchers may wish to replicate these findings with an ethnic-specific sample. Third, although the AARRSI is a culturally specific measure, it is a relatively new instrument. Thus, interpretations should be made with some degree of caution, as further tests of its validity are needed. Finally, given the correlational design of this study, interpretations of causality must be made with caution. Although mediational analysis is explained as a test of the causal influences of one variable on two others (Frazier et al., 2004), it could be that coping behaviors are determined by the level of racism-related stress. For example, it is plausible that individuals who experience high levels of racism-related stress would engage in more coping strategies, which, depending on the strategy, may intensify or dampen their recall of racist experiences. In effect, this alternative model reverses the relationship between the predictor and outcome variables in the current study. Despite the conceptual plausibility of this alternative model, the current study's focus on the mediating role of coping as hypothesized by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) did not permit an examination of this model. Consequently, questions regarding the direction of the relationship between coping and racial stress will need to be addressed through longitudinal analyses.

Limitations notwithstanding, the results of this study raise important questions that should be addressed in future research and practice. Given the limitations outlined above and the fact that this is an understudied area of Asian American research, it is recommended that these results be interpreted with some degree of caution for use in practice. First, it is important to note that racism operates at an institutional and individual level. Thus, to address the psychological impact of racism, clinicians should consider interventions at multiple levels. Although not examined directly,



the findings suggest that interventions aimed at enhancing effective coping strategies may be useful for Asian Americans, particularly college students, who are experiencing psychological problems as a result of perceived racism. Moreover, clinicians may need to be aware that coping strategies that are seemingly adaptive, such as support seeking, may be stress inducing. For instance, clinicians on a college campus may lead race-based intergroup dialogue groups to promote understanding between groups. At an institutional level, counseling psychologists may use their expertise to affect human relations policy. These findings also may have some implications for individual counseling.

Nevertheless, more research is needed for practitioners to make conclusive statements regarding which coping strategies are useful or not. As mentioned earlier, a limited number of studies have addressed the coping behaviors of Asian Americans experiencing racism. The findings of this study point to the need to understand the differential roles of coping strategies for Asian American men and women experiencing racism. Future studies may examine for whom and when specific coping strategies become useful for Asian Americans. For instance, future researchers may examine the role of racial identity in the use and effectiveness of specific coping behaviors. In addition, future studies may examine how the salience of ethnic/racial group membership may influence the use and role of coping strategies in addressing racism. Nevertheless, this study is one small step in addressing the existing vacuum and points to the need for more examinations of racism and psychological well-being.

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Received July 9, 2006

Revision received December 11, 2006

Accepted January 4, 2007 ■

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