The Role of Collective Self-Esteem for Asian Americans Experiencing Racism-Related Stress: A Test of Moderator and Mediator Hypotheses

Christopher T. H. Liang  
University of La Verne

Ruth E. Fassinger  
University of Maryland

This study examined the role of four dimensions of collective self-esteem (CSE) as a moderator and mediator in the relationship between racism-related stress and psychological adjustment among 134 Asian American college students. CSE was not found to moderate the effects of racism-related stress on self-esteem problems, interpersonal problems, or career problems. However, the results of mediator analyses indicated that public CSE is a mechanism that explains the relationship between racism-related stress and self-esteem problems and interpersonal problems but not career problems. No other dimensions of CSE were found to be significant mediators. The implications for these findings for research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Asian American, racism, collective self-esteem, racism-related stress

Psychological stress has been explained to occur when general life events in a person’s environment are perceived and appraised by that individual to be harmful but demand a coping response that is more than that individual is capable of making (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to stress theories, a variety of mental health and physical outcomes are related to the exposure to stress and the capacity for individuals to access resources to cope. It also has been argued that racism is a source of chronic stress that may negatively impact an individual’s well-being (Dion, 2002; Harrell, 2000). Harrell proposed that racism-related stress is the psychological response that is specifically due to direct or indirect exposure to racism. According to Harrell, racism-related stress involves “the race-related transactions between individuals or groups and their environment that emerge from the dynamics of racism, and that are perceived to tax or exceed existing individual and collective resources or threaten well-being” (p. 44). Basing her model on established models of stress (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), depending on the resources available to an individual, racism-related stress will result in higher levels of psychological, physiological, social, or functional problems for people of color.

Although Lazarus and Folkman (1984) have argued that coping strategies mediate the effects of an event, others have argued that coping should be treated as a moderator variable (see Holmbeck, 1997). In short, the mediator hypothesis assumes that the manner by which an individual understands or reacts to stress determines the impact of the stressor on health outcomes. Thus, the stressful event determines the response, which in turn contributes to the relationship between stressor and psychological outcome. Arguments that coping serves to moderate the effects of a stressor assume that a person’s characteristics will either protect or endanger an individual's well-being after experiencing the stressful event. Collective self-esteem (CSE) has been argued to serve as either a mediator or moderator in the relationship between racism-related stress and psychological adjustment. Empirical examinations of these intervening variables have reflected these two viewpoints. The purpose of this present study is to test these two competing models to understand the role of CSE in the relationship between the experiences of racism-related stress and psychological adjustment among Asian American college students.

The Costs of Racism

The role of racism in the psychological functioning of racial minorities has garnered renewed empirical attention in recent years. Prior research has examined the relationship between racism and the psychological, physiological, and subjective well-being of targeted individuals and groups. Those studies have found positive relationships between the experience of racism and physiological stress (e.g., Fang & Myers, 2001; McNeilly et al., 1996) and inverse relationships between racism and both life satisfaction and self-esteem (e.g., Broman, 1997; Jackson et al., 1996) among African American adults and college students. Experiences with racism have been argued to manifest in specific ways for each racial minority group (Liang, Li, & Kim, 2004). For instance, although African American individuals contend with stereotypes of being lazy or dangerous, Asian Americans have been labeled as the “model minority” (Wu, 2002). Further, although Latino/as may be stereotyped as undocumented migrants, Asian Americans are likely to be perceived as being perpetual foreigners with “strange” and “exotic” customs (Takaki, 1998). Leong (1998) also has discussed how Asian Americans must negotiate occupational stereotypes (e.g., quiet and passive), occupational steering, and glass ceilings at work. Thus, racism likely will vary across people from different racial groups. Scholars have begun to examine the effects of racism on Asian Americans’ psychological functioning (e.g.,
Thus research regarding the psychological outcomes of racism among Asian Americans is limited, existing studies do suggest that Asian Americans are negatively affected by racism. For instance, several of the studies indicated that perceived racism negatively affects community well-being, social well-being, depression, and psychological distress (Lee, 2003, 2005), and subjective competence (Ying, Lee, & Tsai, 2000) among Asian Americans. Using stress-coping theory as a framework for their work, racism researchers now have begun to examine the role of other variables in the relationship between experiences of racism and psychological outcomes. In particular, the role of ethnic identity and other-group orientation (Phinney, 1992) has been explored as both a moderator and mediator in several studies. For instance, Lee (2003) found that neither ethnic identity nor other-group orientation (Phinney, 1992) mediated or moderated the effects of racism on psychological well-being among a diverse group of Asian American college students. Other-group orientation, which is defined as openness to interacting with individuals from other ethnic groups, was found to moderate the impact of racism on an individual’s sense of community. In another study, Lee (2005) examined the role of ethnic identity among a sample of Korean American college students. Using a three-factor version of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney, 1992) developed by Lee and Yoo (2004), Lee (2005) tested whether ethnic identity pride, ethnic identity clarity, or other-group orientation served to protect Korean Americans from the effects of racism. He found that although pride in one’s ethnic identity served as a moderator of effects of perceived discrimination on depressive symptoms and social connectedness, ethnic identity clarity and other-group orientation did not serve as moderators. The findings of these two studies point to the utility in ethnic identity in this relationship between racism and psychological problems but also suggest that other explanatory and buffering variables need to be examined as well.

CSE is one factor that has been proposed by scholars to serve a role in the relationship between racism and well-being (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Collective self-esteem is based on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982) and a collectivist perspective (Hogg & Williams, 2000) that posits that an individual’s self-concept is composed of two aspects. The first aspect, personal identity, includes individual attributes (e.g., competence), whereas the second component, social identity, takes into account the value and emotional significance of group membership. Luhtanen and Crocker argued that CSE is distinct from personal self-esteem. For instance, whereas CSE is the way in which an individual appraises one’s own social or cultural group membership, personal self-esteem addresses how an individual feels about him- or herself. Luhtanen and Crocker (1992) explained that CSE is composed of four domains: (a) membership (CSE membership), how worthy participants feel as a member of a social group; (b) private CSE, one’s personal judgment about how good one’s social groups are; (c) public CSE, one’s judgment about how good one’s social groups are as evaluated by other-group members; and (d) importance to identity (CSE identity), the importance of one’s social group memberships to one’s self-concept. Studies using diverse samples have yielded results that indicate that CSE contributes to psychological well-being. In one study, Zea, Reisen, and Poppen (1999) found that CSE was correlated positively with personal self-esteem. Bettencourt and Dorr (1997) found that CSE was related positively to subjective well-being. Among Asian American college students, Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, and Broadnax (1994) found that private CSE was positively related to personal self-esteem. Specifically, Asian Americans who have positive beliefs about their racial group were found to have higher levels of personal self-esteem.

Having a high sense of CSE, or positive evaluations of one’s reference group, has been argued to protect individuals from the harmful effects of experiencing discrimination (Crocker et al., 1994). For instance, individuals who believe that out-group members have negative evaluations of their in-group may be more likely to internalize negative messages regarding that group. As such, the effects of discrimination would have less of a psychological impact on individuals who have higher levels of CSE—that is, more positive appraisals of group membership—than those who have lower levels. In an examination of the protective nature of CSE with a sample of primarily European American college women, Corning (2002) found that it served to moderate the effects of perceived gender-based discrimination on psychological distress. Specifically, she found that individuals with more positive evaluations of women as a group were less susceptible to psychological distress than those with less positive views about their group. In sum, there is some evidence that supports the contention of CSE as a buffer in the relationship between perceived discrimination and psychological adjustment. However, one limitation of this buffer hypothesis is the assumption that CSE arises independent from racism experiences.

An alternative hypothesis, in which CSE serves as a mediator, must be examined. Authors have made theoretical arguments regarding the impact of environments on the manner in which people think about or feel about race (e.g., Helms, 1995). Further, recent studies have indicated the influence of environments on identity-related constructs. In one study involving Latino/a and African American college students, Constantine, Caldwell, Robinson, and Wilton (2002) found that individuals who felt more comfortable with their campus environment had more positive beliefs about their group identity. Similarly, Alvarez and Helms (2001) found that Asian Americans’ assumptions of how the group is viewed by the public were predictive of CSE. Using an experimental design, Boeckmann and Liew (2002) found that participants in the condition in which they were exposed to hate speech directed toward Asian Americans reported lower levels of CSE than those individuals exposed to two other conditions (i.e., hate speech targeting African Americans and hate speech directed against overweight people). These findings suggest that CSE is influenced by experiences with racism. Thus, there is a possibility of a mediating effect of CSE in the relationship between racism experiences and psychological adjustment.

Purpose of the Study

Given the competing models presented for the role of coping, and because the role of CSE in the relationship between racism-related stress and psychological adjustment has not yet been studied with Asian Americans, this current study sought to answer the following question: do CSE membership, public CSE, private
CSE, and CSE identity moderate or mediate the effects of racism-related stress on problems with career development, self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships among American college students? Determining the role of CSE in the relationship between racism-related stress and psychological adjustment may provide clinicians and researchers with direction in their clinical work and scholarship. For instance, if CSE is found to be a moderator, then clinicians may decide to focus their attention on increasing CSE as a way to protect their clients from racism-related stress. One the other hand, if CSE mediates the relationship, then clinicians can help clients understand how their thought processes are influenced by racism events and how those beliefs in turn contribute to their psychological adjustment.

Based on Harrell’s (2000) theory of racism-related stress and Asian American racism-related research, our first set of hypotheses was that racism-related stress will be found to be positively related to each psychological adjustment variable. Specifically, we expected that higher levels of racism-related stress would be associated with career problems, self-esteem problems, and interpersonal problems. Our second set of hypotheses, based on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982), was that each component of CSE would be found to moderate the effects of racism-related stress on each of the three psychological adjustment variables such that higher levels of CSE membership, private CSE, public CSE, and CSE identity would attenuate the effects of racism-related stress. Our third set of hypotheses was based on stress-coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and research examining the environmental predictors of CSE. For this set of hypotheses we expected that each component of CSE would mediate the effects of racism-related stress on psychological adjustment.

The dependent variables were career problems, interpersonal problems, and self-esteem problems. These psychological adjustment constructs were selected because of their centrality in the development of college students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Each dependent variable has been theorized to be impacted by racism. In proposing a model of Asian American college student development, Kodama, McEwen, Liang, and S. Lee (2002) proposed that racism is influential in the vocational, relational, and emotional development of Asian American college students. Further, theorists have argued that racism and other forms of discrimination have deleterious effects on career development (Leong, 1998; Young & Takeuchi, 1998). Other research has indicated significant relationships between racism experiences and self-esteem (Crocker et al., 1994) and interpersonal relationships (Lee, 2003). The decision to select racism-related stress, as opposed to perceived racism, for the independent variable was made because it is an evaluation of a racism event, not just the report of having had a race-based experience. Each component of CSE (CSE membership, public CSE, private CSE, and CSE identity) was studied as an intervening variable in the relationship between racism experiences and psychological outcomes. CSE was selected as the intervening variable of interest because it has been found to be positively related to a wide range of psychological outcomes. More important, CSE was chosen because it is a group-level construct that has been recommended to use when examining intervening factors for threats to social identity (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992).

Participants

Undergraduate Asian American college students enrolled at a large public university in the Mid-Atlantic were recruited to participate in this web-based survey. Participants were recruited through an electronic mail (e-mail) distribution list. This list contained 700 e-mail addresses of randomly selected individuals who self-identified with the university as being Asian American. An e-mail message containing an embedded link to the web-based survey was sent to these students. The recruitment message could not be delivered to 72 individuals because of e-mail address errors or because some users had exceeded the allowed space on their e-mail accounts. Furthermore, the number of e-mail addresses that were active and in use was not known. For instance, it is not uncommon for undergraduate college students to list one e-mail address with the university but actually use another. Over the course of six weeks, three additional e-mail reminders were sent to participants who had not yet completed the survey. The multiple requests for participation yielded 134 participants, 81 (60.4%) of whom were women. In exchange for their participation, participants were entered into one single drawing for one of two monetary prizes (i.e., $75 and $50 prizes).

Demographic data regarding the participants’ ethnicity, year in college, gender, and generational status were collected. The participants’ ages ranged from 17 to 28 (M = 20.16; SD = 1.79). Participants’ reported generation status varied. Seventy-nine (59.0%) of the students reported second-generation status, 28 (20.9%) 1.5-generation status, and 27 (20.1%) first-generation status. The sample was composed of 36 (26.9%) first-year students, 35 (26.1%) second-year students, 38 (28.4%) third-year students, 21 (15.7%) fourth-year students, 2 (1.5%) fifth-year students, and 2 (1.5%) sixth-year students. Participants’ ethnic backgrounds were 36 (26.9%) Chinese, 26 (19.4%) Korean, 18 (13.4%) Taiwanese, 17 (12.7%) Asian Indian, 9 (6.7%) Filipino/a, 6 (4.5%) Pakistani, 5 (3.7%) Vietnamese, 4 (3.0%) multiracial Asian, 2 (1.5%) Cambodian, 2 (1.5%) Indonesian, and 1 (0.7%) Sri Lankan. The ethnic composition of this sample reflects the ethnic composition of the institution in which the present study was conducted.

Instruments

Asian American racism-related stress. Racism-related stress was measured by the Asian American Racism-Related Stress Index (AARRSI; Liang et al., 2004). The AARRSI is a 29-item self-report measure that assesses the stress associated with race-specific events Asian Americans experience. In the questionnaire, respondents are instructed to indicate their responses using the following five-point scale that was adapted from Utsey and Ponterotto’s (1996) Index of Race-Related Stress: 1 = This event has never happened to me or someone I know; 2 = This event happened but did not bother me; 3 = This event happened and I was slightly bothered; 4 = This event happened and I was upset; 5 = This event happened and I was extremely upset. None of the items require reverse scoring.

Liang et al. (2004) reported three subscales of the AARRSI. The first subscale, socio-historical racism (e.g., You learn that Asian...
Americans were historically targets of racist actions), includes 14 items that reflect transgenerational and vicarious experiences with either institutional or cultural racism that Asian Americans may have experienced. The 8-item general racism subscale (e.g., Someone tells you that the kitchens of Asian families smell and are dirty) reflects Asian Americans’ day-to-day direct experience. The third subscale, perpetual foreigner racism (e.g., You are told that “you speak English so well”), contains 7 items that measure a specific form of racism that Asian Americans encounter, that is, Asian Americans’ experiences with being presumed to be an Asian national and not an American citizen. The subscale scores are obtained by summing the items and dividing by the number of items in the subscale. Higher scores on each of these scales indicate a higher level of racism-related stress.

Validity for the AARRSI 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 three separate studies, the coefficient alphas for the total scale ranged from .90 to .95 (Liang et al., 2004). Coefficient alphas for socio-historical racism, general racism, and perpetual foreigner racism ranged from .82 to .93, .75 to .87, and .84 to .88, respectively. Liang et al. also reported 2-week test–retest reliability coefficients for the 29-item AARRSI, and the socio-historical racism, general racism, and perpetual foreigner racism subscales of .87, .82, .73, and .84, respectively. Data from the present study yielded a coefficient alpha of .94 for the total scale and alphas of .88, .81, and .86, respectively, for the subscales. Correlation coefficients between the three subscales ranged from .67 to .83. Thus, the shared variance between these subscales ranged from 45% to 69%. Because a correlation coefficient greater than .60 is considered “very strong” (Heiman, 2005, p. 164) and because of the amount of shared variance of the three subscale scores, we decided to use the total AARRSI score. The range of the total scale scores of this instrument is 29–145.

Collective Self-Esteem

The Collective Self-Esteem Scale (CSES; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) is a 16-item self-report measure that assesses participants’ thoughts about their particular social group. For the purposes of this study and as recommended by Luhtanen and Crocker (1992), the CSES items were modified to substitute “racial/ethnic group” for “social group.” For instance, an original item that reads “Overall, my social group is considered good by others” was modified to read “Overall, my racial/ethnic group is considered good by others.” In the CSES, participants are asked to respond to a 7-item Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

Luhtanen and Crocker (1992) reported four subscales of the CSES (membership CSE, public CSE, private CSE, and identity importance). Each subscale contains four items. The CSE membership subscale (α = .80) contains items that measure how good one feels about membership in a social group (e.g., I often feel I’m a useless member of my racial/ethnic group). The private CSE subscale (α = .90) items are designed to measure participants’ judgments of how good one’s social groups are (e.g., Overall, I often feel that my racial/ethnic group is not worthwhile). Items that assess one’s judgments of how others evaluated one’s social group (e.g., In general, others respect my race/ethnicity) make up the public CSE subscale (α = .77). The identity importance subscale (CSE identity; α = .80) is composed of items that assess the importance of a group membership (e.g., In general, belonging to my race/ethnicity is an important part of my self image). To obtain subscale scores, specific items must first be reverse scored. The possible score range of each of the subscales is 4–28; subscale scores are obtained by calculating the mean of the four item responses. Higher scores on the subscales indicate higher levels of membership esteem, public CSE, private CSE, and salience of identity.

Validity for the CSES (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) was established through positive correlations with personal self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), and collectivism (Hui, 1988). Luhtanen and Crocker also found a 6-week test–retest correlation of .68 for the total scale. In a study of Asian Americans, Alvarez and Helms (2001) reported subscale coefficient alphas of .64 (CSE membership), .75 (public CSE), .75 (private CSE), and .75 (CSE identity). This study yielded coefficient alphas of .69, .80, .70, and .81, respectively.

Psychological adjustment variables. The outcome variables, self-esteem problems, interpersonal relationship problems, and career problems, were measured through the use of the College Adjustment Scales (CAS; Anton & Reed, 1991). The CAS is a self-report inventory designed to assess common psychological and adjustment problems presented by college and university counseling clients. The measure was developed with data from a diverse sample of 1,146 students from across the United States. The sample reflected national enrollment proportions according to gender and ethnic group classification. This measure was used to assess the psychological adjustment of college students. For the purposes of this study, three of the eight scales were included in the study. These three subscales measure self-esteem problems, interpersonal problems, and career problems and were selected because of the centrality of developing purpose, establishing interpersonal relationships, and managing emotions for college students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The 36 Likert-type items (false or not at all true, slightly true, mainly true, very true) yield scores on three 12-item subscales.

The first subscale, self-esteem problems (e.g., I don’t have any particular strengths or talents), is a measure of general, or global, self-esteem. The second subscale, interpersonal problems (e.g., I always get hurt when I let others get close to me), assesses the degree to which students have difficulty relating to others. The subscale career problems (e.g., I’m worried because I can’t find a career that interests me) measures problems associated with career exploration and decision making. Raw scores on the subscales are obtained by summing the corresponding individual item responses. The range of possible scores is 12–48. Normalized T scores are obtained by plotting raw subscale scores. Higher scores indicate more problems encountered in that area. The total CAS raw score can be obtained by summing all items. The CAS was found to be associated with the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck & Steer, 1987), the NEO Personality Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1989), and the Multidimensional Self-Esteem Inventory (O’Brien & Epstein, 1989). Anton and Reed (1991) also reported the internal consistency of CAS scales to range from .80 to .92. In the present study, results yielded coefficient alphas of .88 for the self-esteem
subscale, .86 for the interpersonal problems subscale, and .94 for the career problems subscale.

Results
Preliminary analyses were first conducted to determine if AARRSI, CSE membership, public CSE, private CSE, and CSE identity differed based on gender and generational status. Any statistically significant difference yielded in these analyses would have resulted in the inclusion of those variables in subsequent analyses. Three 2 (Gender) × 3 (Generational Status) multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were conducted. The first 2 × 3 MANOVA with CSE membership, private CSE, public CSE, and CSE identity as dependent variables did not yield any significant main or interaction effect. A second 2 (Gender) × 3 (Generational Status) MANOVA with racism-related stress as the dependent variable was performed. No significant main or interaction effects were found. The third 2 (Gender) × 3 (Generational Status) MANOVA, with self-esteem problems, interpersonal problems, and career problems as dependent variables was conducted, and no significant main or interaction effects were indicated. Thus, neither gender nor generational status was included in the main analyses.

Table 1 presents the mean item scores, internal reliability coefficients, and intercorrelation coefficients for all variables examined in this study. All scales demonstrated adequate reliability.

Test of Moderation Hypotheses
Using Aiken and West’s (1991) statistical procedure for testing whether CSE membership, private CSE, public CSE, or CSE identity would moderate the relationship of racism-related stress and each dependent variable were performed. Three hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted, with self-esteem problems, interpersonal problems, and career problems as dependent variables. Following the recommendations summarized by Frazier, Tix, and Baron (2004), standardized scores from the AARRSI as well as CSE membership, private CSE, public CSE, and CSE identity subscales were entered into the first step of the equation. The second step included the interaction terms as a test of the moderator hypothesis (see Table 2). Effect size and squared semi-partial correlations were examined to determine the magnitude and unique contribution of each first-order and interaction effect. Moderator analyses indicated significant main effects in the first step for each of the three adjustment variables. However, the results from the second step did not support the moderator hypothesis.

Tests of Mediated Model
Mediation differs from the moderation in that instead of serving as a protective factor, CSE is seen as a factor that can explain the relationship between racism-related stress and problems with self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, and career issues. Simply, whereas tests of moderation seek to understand “when” certain relationships occur, tests of mediation result in explanations of “how” or “why” relationships between two variables exists (Baron & Kenny, 1986). To test CSE membership, private CSE, public CSE, and CSE identity as mediators, Baron and Kenny’s (1986) three-step procedure was used. The first step requires that the independent variable, racism-related stress, be statistically significantly associated with the dependent variables of self-esteem problems, interpersonal problems, and career problems. The second step was that the independent variable, racism-related stress, be statistically significantly associated with the mediator variables, CSE membership, private CSE, public CSE, and CSE identity. The third step requires that in order for there to be a mediation effect, CSE membership, private CSE, public CSE, and CSE identity must predict self-esteem problems, interpersonal problems, and career problems above and beyond what is predicted by racism-related stress. Further, the direct effect of racism-related stress should decrease significantly.

An examination of zero-order correlations indicated that racism-related stress was significantly related to self-esteem problems, interpersonal problems, and career problems. In the second step, public CSE was the only mediator to be related to racism-related stress. Thus, based on the first two criteria, three mediation analyses were conducted. Public CSE was examined for mediation effects on self-esteem problems, interpersonal problems, and career problems. Results of these analyses indicated that public CSE partially mediated the effect of racism-related stress on both self-esteem problems and interpersonal problems but not career problems. Evidence of partial mediation was demonstrated by the

![Table 1: Intercorrelations and Descriptive Statistics for Major Variables](image-url)
reduction in the beta weights associated with racism-related stress (see Table 3). Furthermore, the indirect relationship between racism-related stress and interpersonal problems as mediated by public CSE was found to be significant (Sobel’s $t = 2.56, p < .05$). The indirect relationship between racism-related stress and self-esteem problems as mediated by public CSE also was found to be significant (Sobel’s $t = 2.57, p < .05$).

**Discussion**

This current study, in which two competing models were tested, sought to illuminate the role of CSE in the relationship between racism-related stress and self-esteem problems, interpersonal problems, and career problems. Bivariate correlations between racism-related stress and psychological adjustment also were analyzed. As
expected, racism-related stress was found to be positively associated with self-esteem problems, interpersonal problems, and career problems. The finding that the experience of racism-related stress is associated with more self-esteem problems is consistent with theory (Harrell, 2000) and previous Asian American racism-related research (e.g., Lee, 2005). One possible explanation for the relationship between racism-related stress and self-esteem is that individuals may internalize devaluing remarks that are the hallmarks of racism. Individuals who incorporate, into their world-view, the negative messages associated with racism may feel more ashamed of themselves as individuals. This is consistent with postulations offered by racial and cultural identity theorists (e.g., Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1993; Helms, 1995), who have argued that racism may be internalized by people of color.

Asian American college students, like their peers, must interact with peers, faculty, and staff. That racism-related stress was found to be positively associated with interpersonal problems indicates that individuals who reported higher levels of racism-related stress also experience more difficulty in establishing relationships with others. It is possible that individuals who notice and evaluate race-based discriminatory events as stressful also are vigilant in protecting themselves from individual racism. This finding can be understood in the context of racial identity theory (Helms, 1995). For instance, individuals who primarily are operating from a status of immersion/emersion may avoid contact with individuals who are not from the same racial or ethnic background. However, because racial identity attitudes were not assessed in this study, the assumptions regarding the relationship between racism-related stress and interpersonal problems are speculative.

The influence of the experience of race on career-related outcomes has been implied in several career theories (e.g., Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). In this study, racism-related stress was significantly positively associated with career problems. This indicates that increased levels of stress associated with encounters of racism are related to difficulties in the development of career interests and goals. The positive relationship between racism-related stress and career problems found in this study is consistent with Asian American college student development theory (i.e., Kodama et al., 2002) and may be a reflection of how denigrating remarks made by others regarding one’s racial background may be internalized by the targeted individual. An individual who has incorporated negative messages of group worth or ability may question whether he or she should or could pursue particular career choices. One example may be how an Asian American who is teased for his or her English language fluency may be less willing to pursue careers that demand strong English oratory skills. Another example may be how an Asian American who has been teased for not being assertive enough decides to forego careers that may demand assertive leadership styles.

Results from this study do not provide support for the second set of hypotheses. Specifically, data suggest that CSE membership, public CSE, private CSE, and CSE identity do not moderate the negative effects of racism on career, self-esteem, or interpersonal problems. Thus, although bivariate correlational data indicated that higher levels of CSE membership, public CSE, and private CSE are related to less problems associated with each of the three dependent variables, CSE identity did not appear to protect an individual from the negative effects of racism. It may be that having positive thoughts about one’s group and group membership, and the perceptions of others evaluating Asian Americans positively, are not strong enough or stable enough to buffer the effects of racism-related stress. From the perspective of coping theories (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), it may be that these perceptions of the group are affected by racism experiences, which then in turn have an effect on psychological adjustment.

The results of the mediational analyses provided mixed support for the third set of hypotheses. Specifically, the experience of self-esteem problems and interpersonal problems that come as a result of racism-related stress are, in part, explained by how an
individual perceives his or her group to be evaluated by people from other groups. These statistically significant findings are supported by stress-coping models (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Harrell, 2000). In the case of this study, experiences with racism-related stress may be considered the activating event, self-esteem problems and interpersonal problems may be the emotional and behavioral consequence, and public CSE is the strategy that is used to cope with the stressful event. From this perspective, public CSE is a cognitive framing of the stressful event as being a product of negative perceptions of members of an out group. Thus, the individual perceives the event as a result of negative appraisals of Asian Americans held by others.

Framing racism events to be the result of the negative appraisals made by out-group members, however, does not lead to healthy adjustment for Asian American college students. To the contrary, the results of the mediational analyses indicated that adjustment problems with self-esteem and interpersonal relationships are negatively influenced by the appraisal perceived to be made by members of the out group. One explanation for this is that although Asian Americans are adaptively attributing racism events to the negative beliefs of others, they are generalizing these assumptions to other members of out groups. For instance, an Asian American who experiences individual racism may correctly assume that the event was a result of the other person’s belief system. However, that same Asian American may perceive all other out-group members to hold the same negative beliefs. Holding these generalized beliefs may then contribute to that individual having difficulty with his or her self-esteem or in their efforts to establish relationships with members of the out group. The mediational role of public CSE was not supported in the relationship between racism-related stress and career problems. Thus, the relationship between racism-related stress and career problems is direct and cannot be explained by public CSE. One explanation may be that although Asian Americans feel the effects of race-based occupational steering or segregation on their career choices, the influence of public attitudes is lessened by their own belief that they can succeed in life if they work hard enough. The belief in educational attainment and persistence has been noted in the values of Asian Americans (Leong, 1998). This interpretation should be tested in future career-related studies.

None of the three remaining dimensions of CSE (private CSE, CSE identity, CSE membership) yielded significant mediational effects. These null findings suggest that the relationships between racism-related stress and self-esteem problems and interpersonal problems are not contingent upon one’s beliefs or feelings about his or her group. Given that these three dimensions of CSE measure an individual’s own evaluation of the group or the value of his or her membership, it may be that Asian Americans do not make negative appraisals of their own group as a result of racism experiences. Thus, these analyses indicate that although Asian Americans frame racism experiences to be a result of the negative attitudes of others, they also do not minimize the importance of their own group or devalue their group to cope with the event. One explanation may that Asian Americans have been socialized racially or culturally to understand the nature of racism and as a result are adept at externalizing negative race-related events. From racial socialization experiences, Asian Americans may have learned to separate how others feel about them from the value they hold of their own group. The methods for and the role of racial socialization for Asian Americans has not yet been examined. However, this study points to the importance of examining its role in how Asian Americans understand and cope with racism.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

The present study demonstrated several strengths. First, a culturally specific measure was utilized to assess racism-related stress. Second, by examining the contribution of CSE in the relationship between racism and psychological outcomes, psychologists and counselors have an additional source of information regarding the racism experiences of Asian Americans. However, there were several limitations to this study. First, this study utilized a correlational field design. Thus, from a methodological standpoint, the results of the study do not necessarily suggest that racism-related stress caused impairment in self-esteem problems, interpersonal problems, or career problems. An alternate explanation, that individuals with high levels of self-esteem problems and interpersonal problems are more sensitive to racism-related stress and intergenerational family conflict, also is plausible.

Another limitation lies in the generalizability of the findings. Because the sample was composed of college students attending a university in the mid-Atlantic region, the findings of this study may lack wide generalizability. Further, examination of demographic data also indicated that there were more East Asians than any other group combined. Thus, experiences of racism of ethnic groups with smaller representation in the sample may have been masked. To address this limitation, future studies may wish to replicate these findings within an ethnic-specific sample. Finally, though significant results in the mediation analyses suggest that these are areas that require further examination, the small effect sizes yielded in this study limit external validity and are important to consider when interpreting the findings.

Implications

Limitations notwithstanding, there are several implications of these findings for research and practice. First, with regard to practice, these findings suggest that providing Asian Americans with an opportunity to explore racism experiences while also challenging generalized belief systems that come from those encounters may be important to their psychological adjustment. In essence, a practitioner may work with an Asian American to provide relief for the immediate outcomes of the racism-related stress-inducing event while also guiding the individual from a place of strong generalized distrust of others to a more balanced perspective. Clinicians also may engage their clients in an exploration of the role of race and culture in their life. For instance, a clinician may ask, “What are your feelings about being a member of your cultural group?” or “How do you think Asian Americans are perceived on your campus/work environment?” Finally, clinicians wishing to challenge generalized beliefs may refer clients to interpersonal-oriented process groups or interrace dialogue groups, where interactions across racial differences may occur.

The results of this study raise important questions that should be addressed in future research. First, given the partial support for the mediational model, CSE does appear to have a role in the psychological adjustment of Asian Americans. However, given the limitations of this study, interpretations must be made with caution.
until these findings are replicated in future examinations. Future studies also should consider examining the role of racial socialization, racial identity, or specific coping strategies in these relationships among racism-related stress, collective self-esteem, and psychological adjustment. Finally, given the correlational nature of this study, future examinations should consider employing longitudinal or experimental designs to more clearly identify the direction of the relationships found in this study.

Conclusion

The purpose of this present study was to examine two competing models for CSE in the relationship between racism-related stress and indicators of psychological adjustment. We hope that doing so will provide researchers and clinicians with some direction for future and practical examinations of racism experiences. The findings of this study showed positive relationships between racism-related stress and self-esteem problems, interpersonal problems, and career problems. Though data failed to provide support for moderator hypotheses, a test of the mediational model did indicate that public CSE is an important dimension to consider in understanding the relationship between racism-related stress and interpersonal problems and self-esteem problems. Given the relative paucity of Asian American race-related research, we hope that these findings will spur additional scholarship and more effective practice in examining the role of CSE or other intervening variables in the racism experiences of Asian Americans.

References


