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Adolescent Girls' Experiences of Discrimination: An Examination of Coping Strategies, Social Support, and Self-Esteem

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Abstract

The research examined (a) girls' responses to personal experiences of gender and/or ethnic/racial discrimination, (b) social support from parents and friends following the discrimination, and (c) the relationship between girls' reported coping strategies to the discrimination and their self-esteem. Participants were 74 adolescent girls ($M = 16.3$ years) from diverse ethnic backgrounds in California. Each girl completed an online survey that included open-ended questions about a personal experience of discrimination and self-reported coping strategies, as well as a questionnaire measure of self-esteem. Results indicate that girls' reported coping strategies were varied. Avoidance strategies such as ignoring the situation were most common, but many girls also reported use of approach strategies such as confronting the discrimination. Social support from family and friends was related to self-esteem. The study highlights ways in which family and friends may help or hinder girls as they cope with different kinds of discrimination.

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I chose to write [a memoir] about my father. When it came time for anonymous peer editing, I was disappointed with a certain comment that was left by one of my classmates. He underlined the word, *chai*, and wrote beneath it, "Us Americans might not know what this word is." Whether or not he associated this with my father's name . . . or simply because the word *chai* isn't native, he was still being racist . . . *My mother helped me, and suggested that I talk to the teacher . . .* My mother seemed more outraged than me, because *she understood a little bit more about racism and what my father went through* [emphasis added]. At first I didn't think it was that big of a deal, but then I realized, wow, there still is racism out there! (15-year-old Asian American girl)

I was harassed by guys walking by on the street. I told my sister conversationally and we both ranted for a little while about men and how they have no respect for women. *She said she was sorry that happened but it's something we have to learn how to deal with* because no matter how unfair it is, women get approached like this everyday. She just said that *it's something we can't really change so I have no choice but to let it go* [emphasis added]. (17-year-old European American girl)

The above narratives highlight the potential importance of studying how conversations with family and friends may affect how adolescent girls think about and cope with discrimination. In the first narrative, the respondent may not have been aware that the comment by her classmate was racist until she talked to her mother. Talking to others about personal experiences of unfair treatment may provide the impetus for discussing discrimination. In the second narrative, the respondent's sister urges her to ignore the sexual harassment she has experienced because it is inevitable; this suggests particular coping skills may be encouraged or discouraged through these conversations with others. The current research was designed to explore how girls cope with discrimination and the support they may receive from parents and peers.

Prior research has documented that interpersonal discrimination is common among adolescents and young adults (e.g., Brown & Bigler, 2005; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Ferguson, & Bylsma,

2003). Investigations of racist discrimination among ethnic-minority adolescents and young adults have focused on their experiences of hostile behaviors (e.g., racial slurs) and biased treatment (e.g., social exclusion, teacher bias; Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Killen, Lee-Kim, McGlothlin, & Stangor, 2002; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Swim et al., 2003). Past studies of gender discrimination in adolescence have highlighted sexual harassment (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2011; Roscoe, Strouse, & Goodwin, 1994; Swim et al., 2001; Terrance, Logan, & Peters, 2004; Timmerman, 2003) as well as gender bias in academic and athletic achievement (Leaper & Brown, 2008). Although sexual harassment is directed to boys as well as girls, it is more common and tends to be more debilitating for girls than boys (AAUW, 2011). Accordingly, to limit the scope of the present study, we focused on a sample of adolescent girls.

While much research on discrimination examines one type of discrimination in isolation (e.g., racism, sexism), psychology has begun to call attention to how race, class, and gender operate together in people's lives (e.g., see Buchanan & Ormerod, 2002; Cole, 2009; Davenport & Yurich, 1991). Attributing discrimination to one identity or another (e.g., race vs. gender) is not always possible when one has multiple disadvantaged identities (e.g., working class girls of color; Buchanan & Ormerod, 2002; Yoder & Aniakudo, 1997). In other words, the reason for discrimination is not always attributable to only gender, race, *or* class. Examining the ways in which race, class, and gender are connected is known as *intersectionality* (Cole, 2009; Collins, 2000). Furthermore, researchers may ask participants to report how many times they have been treated unfairly and then allow them to make an attribution to race, gender, social class, or other status characteristics (Benner & Kim, 2009; Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999; Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers, & Jackson, 2010). Although there can be a discrepancy between experiencing unfair treatment and labeling it as discrimination, experiences of discrimination appear to have similar consequences whether or not they are labeled as such (Magley, Hulin, Fitzgerald, & DeNardo, 1999).

Three research goals are addressed in this study. First, we sought to identify the kinds of coping strategies that adolescent girls reported using in response to real-life experiences with discrimination based on race/ethnicity, gender, class, or other status characteristics. Second, we focused on qualities related to social support from parents and friends given its potential value when coping with discrimination. Finally, we tested whether reported coping strategies in response to discrimination were related to girls' self-esteem. The rationale for each of these research goals is reviewed below.

Coping With Discrimination

Experiencing discrimination has been shown to negatively influence mental and physical health in numerous ways (Benner & Kim, 2009; Coker et al., 2009; Huynh & Fuligni, 2010; Neblett et al., 2008; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). For example, Hugynh and Fuligni (2010) found many negative effects of reported discrimination among youth including lower self-esteem, more internalizing symptoms, and lower academic achievement. The AAUW (2011) report also found that sexual harassment had emotional and academic consequences and that these were more common among girls than boys. Other findings have suggested that coping may serve as a buffer against some of the negative effects of discrimination (Foster, 2000).

Coping can be defined as individuals' attempts to manage demands that are assessed as stressful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping includes a variety of cognitive and behavioral responses and has been characterized in many ways. Various terms have been used to classify coping strategies including approach versus avoidance, engagement versus disengagement, and problem-focused versus emotion-focused (see Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). The current study draws on the approach/avoidance distinction (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Approach coping strategies are oriented toward threat, such as when a girl confronts a perpetrator or seeks help from friends. In contrast, avoidance strategies are oriented away from threat, such as ignoring discrimination. Whereas some girls might rely centrally on avoidant strategies (e.g., ruminating privately about problems or trying to avoid the harasser), other girls may favor approach-oriented strategies (e.g., problem-solving or seeking emotional reassurance; AAUW, 2011; Ayres, Friedman, & Leaper, 2009).

In the past few decades, coping researchers have turned their attention toward adolescence as an important developmental period for study. Research has found that coping strategies change with age, such that adolescents are more likely than younger children (a) to directly address the perpetrator to solve the problem, (b) to discuss the problem with people in similar situations, and (c) to use social support (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995). These changes may be due to cognitive and social developmental factors such as abstract and hypothetical thinking, perspective taking, inner reflection of possible solutions, knowledge of social convention, and the ability to use social relationships for information and emotional support (Compas et al., 2001; Seiffge-Krenke, 1995).

Research has begun to examine how youth cope with discrimination. Scott's (2003) research examining how African American youth respond to racial discrimination found several approach coping strategies, such as seeking social support and problem solving, were most frequently reported. One avoidance strategy, distancing, was also common, whereas other avoidance strategies, such as internalizing and externalizing, tended to be infrequent unless the discrimination was particularly distressing.

To investigate people's coping strategies in response to discrimination, researchers have often examined participants' appraisals of different responses to hypothetical scenarios. Although these appraisals can guide the kinds of responses that people will make in stressful situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), it is also true that individuals' views of how they might respond often differ from how they actually cope in their everyday lives (Brinkman, Garcia, & Rickard, 2011; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). Accordingly, we examined girls' descriptions of how they coped with a personal experience of discrimination. We considered girls' reported uses of approach and avoidant coping strategies. In addition, we paid particular attention to social support as a coping strategy, which we review next.

Social Support From Parents and Peers

Parents as well as friends may play important roles in helping girls cope with discrimination in adolescence. Although adolescence is often characterized as a developmental period of high parent-child conflict, research indicates that most parent-adolescent relationships are close and supportive (Silverberg, Tennenbaum, & Jacob, 1992). In addition, girls' friendships become increasingly intimate and supportive during adolescence (Berndt, 1989; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005; Way & Greene, 2006). This suggests that relationships with parents and friends may be an important context for sharing experiences of discrimination as well as developing coping strategies (Hughes et al., 2006; Neblett et al., 2008; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005).

Seeking social support is an approach coping strategy known to buffer the negative effects of stress in general (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) as well as discrimination more specifically (Ajrouch, Reisine, Lim, Sohn, & Ismail, 2010). Social support is conceptualized as information that leads the individual to feel she is cared for, valued, and esteemed (Cobb, 1976), and can come from multiple sources (e.g., family, friends, teachers, etc.). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) discuss this concept as a resource "available in the social environment, but which the person must cultivate and use" (p. 250). Social

support can have both emotional and informational functions (Berndt, 1989; Schaefer, Coyne, & Lazarus, 1981). Emotional support occurs through reassurance, promoting one's values, and helping one to feel better. Informational support includes advice and guidance in coping. Research has found that adolescents rely on their parents for both types of support and see peers as important sources of emotional support (Malecki & Demaray, 2003).

Approach-oriented coping strategies such as social support become more common in adolescence (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995). In addition, girls are more likely than boys to use more social support in response to general stressors as well as specifically in response to racial and gender discrimination (Frydenberg, 1997; Scott & House, 2005; Timmerman, 2003). Although women and girls report using social support more, these strategies are not necessarily in lieu of others. Frydenberg (1997) found that girls were using as many problem-solving strategies as were boys. It may be the case that girls are not solely seeking emotional support from others but are also problem solving with others. Thus research suggests social support is a common coping strategy among adolescent girls, but little research has examined particular forms of social support for dealing with discrimination during adolescence and how they may be helpful.

Social support from parents. Parents are potential assets for children when coping with discrimination due to ethnicity/race, gender, or other status characteristics. Most prior studies have focused on parent support in relation to ethnic/racial discrimination (see Hughes et al., 2008). Most notably, relevant prior research on ethnic socialization suggests that some parents transmit specific messages about discrimination and coping to their children through conversation. Conversations about discrimination are more likely when parents and children have experienced personal discrimination (Hughes & Chen, 1997; Hughes et al., 2006). Parents' messages may be either proactive (e.g., warning about possible future discrimination) or reactive (e.g., helping child to cope with discrimination they already encountered; Hughes et al., 2008). This research suggests adolescents may initiate these conversations by sharing their experiences of discrimination with others, namely, parents. In the present study, we examined if and how girls discussed potential coping strategies during conversations with parents or peers following an experience of discrimination due to race/ethnicity, gender, and/or class. To address this phenomenon, we asked girls about a time when they sought social support following discrimination.

There may be average ethnic/racial differences in parent-adolescent conversations about discrimination. Parents from some ethnic groups may be more likely to talk more about preparation for bias than others (Hughes &

Chen, 1997; Hughes et al., 2006). Yet, to our knowledge, no research has compared ethnic-minority and European American families regarding discussions about discrimination. Ethnic-minority and other socially disadvantaged groups may have more experiences with and thus be more aware of discrimination. Thus they may be more likely to validate their daughters' experiences of oppression or discuss with them how to cope.

Social support from peers. Besides parents, peers are a common source of social support following discrimination. Indeed, girls may be as likely if not more likely to talk to peers as opposed to parents or teachers (AAUW, 2011; Ayres et al., 2009; Swim et al., 2003; Timmerman, 2003). This is notable given that very little research has examined how adolescents talk to peers about these incidents. Parents or friends may put their daughters' experiences in a larger context by sharing similar experiences (AAUW, 2001) or discussing how one's social group (e.g., women, Mexican Americans) has historically been oppressed. Conversations with peers may be similar or different to conversations with parents. On one hand, peers may be more likely than parents to share similar experiences because they are likely to be engaged in similar contexts (e.g., school, work). On the other hand, parents are more likely than peers to have a longer history of experiences with discrimination and education. Therefore, parents may be more likely to help their daughters frame their experiences of discrimination in the larger historical, social, and political context.

In summary, research on social support coping and ethnic socialization points to conversations with parents and peers as important contexts for the development of an understanding of discrimination as well as coping strategies. The current study examined who girls chose to talk to about their experience of discrimination and how social support from others might be important. The ways in which these aspects of conversations may influence girls will be discussed next.

Relation of Social Support to Girls' Self-Esteem

Our final research goal was to investigate the possible relation of girls' reported social support coping with discrimination to their self-esteem. As noted earlier in our review, experience with discrimination is related to increased risk for a variety of adjustment difficulties. One of them is lowered self-esteem. Whereas experiencing discrimination is negatively correlated with self-esteem (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000), social support is positively associated with self-esteem (Demaray, Malecki, Davidson, Hodgson, & Rebus, 2005; Greene & Way, 2005). In addition, research has found that

preparing kids for racism may serve as a buffer against the negative effects of discrimination (Fischer & Shaw, 1999; Neblett et al., 2008). Taken together, we expect social support may provide a buffer against the negative effects of discrimination due to race/ethnicity, gender, or other status characteristics; however, this outcome may be contingent on the specific form of social support.

We separately considered emotional reassurance, derogation of perpetrators, and informational support as three forms of social support. Prior research suggests each type of social support may be helpful when coping with discrimination. First, emotional reassurance—that is, talking about stressful events and receiving validation from others—is associated with better psychological well-being (Pennebaker, 1997). By contrast, other research has found that perseveration on negative events is tied to internalizing problems (Rose, 2002). Second, derogating members of the perpetrator's outgroup (e.g., bashing men in response to sexism) may help to repair esteem. This expectation derives from social identity theory, which emphasizes the importance of ingroup bias and outgroup hostility to enhance self-esteem (Tajfel, 1982). Third, informational support from parents and peers may help girls to maintain self-esteem by preventing girls from attributing discrimination to their lack of worth, ability, or achievement. Informational support could include things like putting discrimination in a larger context or making a suggestion about how to cope with a future incident. Research suggests that making an external attribution to discrimination (e.g., perceiving discrimination as stemming from social injustice or inequality) rather than attributing negative feedback to personal failure may protect self-esteem (Crocker & Major, 1989).

The Present Study

The present study had three primary goals. The first goal was to examine how adolescent girls describe how they cope with discrimination. We additionally tested if the different coping responses varied depending on the girls' ethnicity or the type of attribution for the discrimination (gender, race/ethnicity, social class, or intersectional). The second goal was to closely examine one type of coping, social support, by describing girls' conversations with parents and peers about discrimination and coping. Lastly, we tested the ways in which conversations about discrimination were related to girls' self-esteem. Some distinctive features of our study include our use of girls' personal narratives about how they cope with real experiences with discrimination, getting the adolescent perspective on parent-child socialization around issues of discrimination, and looking at the role peers play in helping teens cope.

Method

Participants

Participants were 74 adolescent girls aged 14 to 19 years ($M = 16.3$ years, $SD = 1.17$). The participants reflected a range of ethnic backgrounds with 62% White European American, 26% Latina, 4% Asian American, 1% African American, and 7% mixed ethnicity. Social class background was determined by parental education; 15% of the participants' parents had some high school or less, 4% had only a high school degree, 22% had some college, 23% had a college degree, and 32% had some postgraduate study or a postgraduate degree. Three participants did not know the education level of either parent. Of the remaining sample, a total of 54 girls ($M = 16.3$ years, $SD = 1.22$) provided a description of an experience with discrimination used in the present study ($n = 30$ European American and $n = 24$ ethnic-minority). The criteria for the selection of these girls are explained later in the procedure section.

Adolescent girls were recruited through schools and youth organizations in California (primarily in northern California). Participants who were recruited through schools were told about the study by the first author, a female research assistant, or a teacher. Those who were recruited through organizations saw an informational flyer and were asked to email the first author if they were interested in participating. They were also told they would receive a US\$10 gift certificate for completing the survey. The study was explained via email and parental consent was mailed to them. Active parental consent was obtained for all participants under 18 years of age.

Procedure

Once parental consent was obtained, participants were given a web address and password to access the online survey. After another explanation of the study, and prior to beginning the survey, all adolescents were asked to give their own consent to participate. The survey consisted of a series of open-ended and close-ended questions and took approximately 1 hour to complete.

The survey included both open-ended questions asking participants to describe an experience of discrimination as well as close-ended questionnaire measures. The first part included being asked to describe a salient experience of discrimination (see appendix). We asked about one memorable experience because we were interested in depth rather than breadth. They were asked if they had ever been treated unfairly due to race, class, and/or gender. A specific experience with discrimination was elicited including the source of

discrimination, the context, why they thought it occurred, and how they responded. Participants were also asked if they told anyone about the event and asked follow-up questions about the conversation. As described in subsequent sections, we coded features of the discrimination experiences, the response to discrimination, and the conversation about the experience. After writing their personal narrative about discrimination, participants were asked to complete some questionnaire measures, including a self-esteem measure (described later).

Among the 74 girls who participated in the study, we ultimately selected 54 girls for use in the present set of analyses. Twenty girls were dropped for the following reasons: First, 8 participants (all European American background) were dropped because they did not provide a description of a personal experience with discrimination—with 4 girls indicating they had not experienced discrimination, 3 girls indicating they could not recall an experience, and 1 girl providing an unclear response. Second, 2 girls were dropped because they described forms of discrimination that were not mentioned by any other girls (1 due to only sexual orientation and 1 due to only age). Finally, 10 girls were dropped who described discrimination based only on class. Although we were interested in this form of discrimination, we dropped these girls due to their low frequencies and the relatively high SES of the sample. That is, we did not believe we could appropriately make inferences regarding class-based discrimination.

Thus our final sample was comprised of 54 girls who had experienced discrimination involving gender or race/ethnicity. This included girls who attributed discrimination to an intersection of status characteristics as long as the experience involved gender or race/ethnicity. That is, gender or race/ethnicity played a salient role in the experience with discrimination although other status characteristics also may have been cited. Among the 54 girls used in the analyses, 26 girls attributed discrimination to gender only, 14 attributed discrimination to race/ethnicity only, and 14 girls who attributed discrimination to an intersection of status characteristics that included at least gender or race/ethnicity (e.g., gender and race/ethnicity, gender and class, race/ethnicity and class).

Coding Personal Narratives

Each narrative was coded for the coping responses used as well as the theme(s) present in the conversation with a parent or peer. The first author and a female undergraduate research assistant did all coding and reliability was established. All disagreements were discussed and a code was agreed

on. The specific codes are described in subsequent sections. Examples of each coping response and social support theme are presented in the Results section.

According to Fleiss's (1981) guidelines, kappa coefficients below .40 reflect "poor" agreement. Kappa values between .40 and .75 reflect "fair to good" agreement, and values above .75 indicate "excellent" agreement. All of the categories had satisfactory levels of agreement with most falling into the excellent range. Because the coding categories were not mutually exclusive, intercoder agreement was computed separately (present or absent) for each category. This is generally considered a more conservative approach to computing intercoder agreement (Bakeman, Quera, McArthur, & Robinson, 1997). Kappa coefficients for each coding category are indicated in parentheses with definitions below.

Coping responses. The coding categories used to classify coping responses were adapted from Phinney and Chavira (1995). We coded for eight types of coping. Each case was coded for the presence or absence of each type of coping.

Five of the coping responses were considered approach strategies: *Seeking help from others* included seeking social support or reporting the unfair treatment to an authority person ($\kappa = .90$). *Confronting* was coded if the participant reported talking to the perpetrator about the discrimination ($\kappa = .59$). In contrast to confronting, *verbal retort* was coded if the participant responded verbally to the perpetrator if the response was not an effort to have a discussion or confront the discrimination ($\kappa = 1.0$). *Self-affirmation* included perceiving what others thought was meaningless because the respondent felt good about herself ($\kappa = .82$). Finally, *disprove* was coded if girls reported emphasizing hard work to try and prove a stereotype wrong ($\kappa = .91$).

Three of the coping responses were considered avoidant strategies: *Emotional response* included reports of feeling emotional or expressing emotions such as crying ($\kappa = .73$). *Ignore* was coded if the girl reported remaining in the situation but doing nothing ($\kappa = .60$). In contrast, *withdrawal* was coded if the participant reported leaving the situation ($\kappa = .91$).

Social support conversational themes. After describing an experience with discrimination, girls were asked if they talked about the incident with anyone. The conversations were coded inductively for the presence or absence of five themes: *Messages about coping* was coded if the conversation included some discussion of how the participant could/should deal (or already dealt) with the discrimination ($\kappa = .83$). *Emotional reassurance* included talking about emotions, seeking or giving reassurance, venting, or expressing emotional feelings ($\kappa = .73$). *Discussion of discrimination* included labeling an event or

person as prejudiced, drawing on stereotypes, or talking of prejudice in general ($\kappa = .70$). *Sharing a similar story* occurred if the listener shared a similar story as that of the participant ($\kappa = .88$). *Derogation of perpetrator* referred to verbal bashing or making generalizations about the perpetrator or a group associated with the person who perpetrated the discrimination ($\kappa = .81$).

Self-Esteem

At the end of the survey, participants were asked to complete some questionnaire measures. One of them used in the present analyses was the Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale. This measure included 10 items assessing how the participants generally feel about themselves (e.g., "I am able to do things as well as most other people"). Participants rated each statement on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). The scale has been widely used and had good internal consistency among the current sample ($\alpha = .87$).

Results

The results are presented in three parts corresponding to each research goal. First, we describe the patterns associated with girls' narratives of how they coped with personal discrimination. Second, we summarize the findings regarding themes of social support in girls' conversations with parents and peers about discrimination. Lastly, we present the results testing the relation of social support messages about discrimination to girls' self-esteem. When applicable, ethnic/racial differences will be noted. With all the inferential tests, both significance level and effect size are reported. The latter include either eta-square (with F ratios) or Cramer's V (with chi-square). Each reflects the proportion of variance accounted for by the predictor.

Adolescent Girls' Strategies for Coping With Discrimination

Percentages of occurrence and examples of reported coping responses. Among the approach strategies, *seeking help* was most often mentioned. It was cited by 30% of the girls. A 16-year-old Latina girl's response exemplified this theme when she wrote, "We decided to tell our parents that there were some boys making fun of the way we spoke and they talked to the teachers about it." In this example, the girl indicates that her parents were a resource to whom she could go when some boys were bothering her.

The next most common approach strategy was *confronting*, which was cited among 17% of the girls. For example, this was seen when a 17-year-old

European American girl realized that she was being paid less than her male coworker. She stated, "I confronted my manager about it, and requested that we be paid fairly, or I would find work elsewhere." In this manner, she dealt with the situation by directly addressing the source of the discrimination.

Disproving a negative stereotype was mentioned among 13% of the girls. This was seen in a 15-year-old European American girl's response to unfair treatment by her male peers in an advanced math class. As she explained, "I worked harder in the class until I could prove to them that I was supposed to be there and deserved the place in the class." Thus she was able to cope by finding a way to invalidate the negative stereotype that she had encountered.

Two other coping responses occurred relatively rarely. One was *self-affirmation*, which was mentioned by 6% of the girls. A 17-year-old Asian American girl reported using this coping strategy in response to having boys make false assumptions about her athletic abilities. "I know I can play with the boys so I know I was not missing out on anything," she wrote. The same girl continued, "We don't need to prove that we can keep up with the pace because we already know we can." In this manner, the girl can be seen to cope with negative comments by thinking positive thoughts about her own abilities.

The other infrequently mentioned coping response was *verbal retort*, which was cited by 6% of the girls. A 17-year-old European American girl indicated using this strategy after she had been teased by classmates for being friends with students who had a different ethnic background than her. She wrote that she "told them to shut up and that I didn't give a shit what they thought and stopped letting it get to me." In this manner, the girl forcefully asserted herself but—unlike confrontation—was not seeking some sort of redress from the perpetrators.

The three avoidant strategies were cited more often than any of the approach strategies. First, *emotional responses* to discrimination were reported by 39% of the girls. A 16-year-old mixed-ethnic girl wrote about responding emotionally after an experience in which she felt she was perceived negatively for standing up for herself. She responded, "After the experience I ignored the guys and pretended like they weren't bothering me even though deep inside I hurt really bad."

Next, most girls mentioned either *ignoring* or *withdrawing*. Ignoring the discrimination (remaining in the situation and doing nothing) was indicated by 35% of the girls. To illustrate, a 15-year-old European American girl reported ignoring men who sexually harassed her. She wrote, "I usually just keep walking and ignore them." Also, withdrawing (leaving the situation) was mentioned by 24% of the girls. For example, a 14-year-old Latina girl reported that, "My family and I left the restaurant because we were treated

unfairly [due to our ethnicity].” Because these two categories were mutually exclusive, it means that 59% of girls reported using one or more of these strategies.

Testing associations among coping responses, discrimination attribution, and ethnicity. First, we tested if there was an association between the attribution for discrimination and ethnicity. Not surprisingly, ethnic-minority girls were more likely (46%) than European American girls (10%) to recall an experience of discrimination they attributed to race/ethnicity, $\chi^2(1, N = 54) = 8.92$, Cramer’s $V = .41, p = .003$. In contrast, European American girls were more likely (63%) than ethnic-minority girls (29%) to recall gender-related discrimination, $\chi^2(1, N = 54) = 6.23$, Cramer’s $V = .34, p = .013$. There was no significant difference between ethnic-minority girls (25%) and European American girls (27%) in reference to intersectional experiences, $\chi^2(1, N = 54) = .019$, Cramer’s $V = .02, p = .618$.

Next, we tested whether there were significant associations between coping strategies and type of attributed discrimination (gender, race/ethnicity, or intersectional). There were no significant associations.

Finally, we tested if coping strategies and ethnicity were related. There was one coping strategy associated with a significant difference based on the girls’ ethnicity. European American girls were more likely (27%) than ethnic-minority girls (4%) to confront the perpetrator, $\chi^2(1, N = 54) = 4.86$, Cramer’s $V = .30, p = .027$.

Social Support Following Discrimination

About two thirds of the girls (69%, $n = 37$) reported talking to someone about the discrimination they experienced. Among these girls, the cited sources of social support included peers/friends ($n = 27$), parents ($n = 27$), siblings ($n = 6$), and school personnel ($n = 6$). However, most girls ($n = 26$) indicated they received support from more than one of source—with the most common being a combination of parent support and peer/friend support ($n = 14$). When a single source of support was mentioned, these were either a peer/friend ($n = 8$) or a parent ($n = 3$).

We conducted chi-square tests to examine if girls’ likelihood of talking to someone following discrimination was related to either the discrimination attribution (gender, ethnicity/race, or intersectional) or ethnicity (ethnic-minority or European American). There were no significant differences for discrimination attribution. In other words, gender, race, and intersectional experiences were equally likely to be discussed with others. There was a significant difference associated with ethnic background. European American

girls were more likely than ethnic-minority girls to talk to someone following discrimination, $\chi^2(1, N = 54) = 4.13$, Cramer's $V = .28$, $p = .042$.

Social Support Themes

After indicating all of the persons with whom they had discussed the targeted incident with discrimination, girls were asked to describe one memorable conversation with someone about discrimination. Of these responses, 15 were with a friend, peer, or boyfriend, 12 were with a parent, 5 included a sibling or cousin, and 4 included school personnel. These were further coded into three categories: parent, peer, and school personnel. The peer category was comprised of friend, boyfriend, sibling, cousin, and peer. Analyses that compared conversations between parents and peers did not include school personnel.

Percentages of occurrence and examples of social support themes. A common theme in these conversations was *messages about coping with discrimination* (63%). Among those who discussed how to cope, 86% discussed using an approach strategy and 14% discussed using an avoidance strategy. This narrative from a 17-year-old European American girl is an example of a conversation that includes messages about coping:

[My friends at work] asked me why I hadn't been there for the first set building day, and I told them that the manager told me he didn't want a girl working on his crew. They were annoyed at the boss, angry that he was being so sexist and not recognizing that I was just as able as any of the guys to build and handle the sets for the play. We did [discuss how to deal], and they agreed to speak to the manager. They also encouraged me to talk to him.

As the example illustrates, this girl talked to her friends at work and they suggested ways that she might cope with the manager's sexist behavior.

Emotional reassurance was another common theme. It occurred among over half (57%) of the conversations about discrimination. A 17-year-old European American indicated receiving emotional reassurance from her mother in the following excerpt:

I was annoyed with the fact that I was being paid less because of my gender (especially considering I was more qualified than my co-worker). I talked to my mother to confirm my decision and make sure I was in the right state of mind by being upset about it.

In this example, the girl indicated that her mother had helped to validate her feelings and actions regarding her experience with discrimination at work.

Discussion of discrimination was a third theme, and it occurred in about one third (34%) of the conversations. This theme was reflected in the following excerpt from a 15-year-old Asian American girl's narrative regarding someone's comment about her dad being Chinese:

My mother seemed more outraged than me, because she understood a little bit more about racism and what my father went through. At first I didn't think it was that big of a deal, but then I realized, wow, there still is racism out there!

We see that the mother affirmed the girl's experience with discrimination and helped her understand it.

Sharing a similar story was the fourth theme identified. This refers to the listener sharing a similar experience with discrimination. The theme represented nearly one fourth (23%) of the conversations. To illustrate, a 17-year-old European American girl's reported conversation with a male peer about her sexist teacher. She explained how "one boy I was talking to *went through the similar thing* with a male teacher as well, but he disregarded the boys. I thought it was interesting that we sort of went through the same thing." In this example, her male friend had also experienced gender discrimination (although toward boys) and shared his story in response to her talking about her own incident.

Finally, *derogation of the perpetrator* was the least common theme reported (11%). This theme sometimes occurred in conjunction with the theme of sharing a similar story as seen in an example from a 16-year-old mixed-ethnicity girl. After telling her brother about an experience with racial discrimination, her brother shared a similar experience that also involved derogation:

My brother was talking about how one time a cop pulled him over and asked him his race and he said "American" . . . His reaction was to imitate a Hick and say "but [you're] brown and she's not. How can this be" and we just laughed it off. He said most of the people that live in those suburbs are uneducated hicks with money.

In this example, the girl's brother was seen as offering support by making fun of the perpetrator of discrimination.

Testing for differences in themes by discrimination attribution, source of support, or ethnicity. We conducted three sets of comparison tests to see if the social support themes varied by either type of discrimination (gender, race/ethnicity, or intersectional), source of social support (parent or peer), or ethnicity (ethnic-minority or European American). There were no significant differences based on the type of discrimination reported. Next, we tested if the themes varied depending on the source of support being from peers or parents. There were no significant differences associated with discussions of coping, emotional reassurance, or discussions of discrimination. Sharing a similar story as well as derogation of perpetrator occurred only in conversations with peers.

Our final set of comparisons of ethnic-minority and European American girls indicated one significant difference. European American girls were more likely to report talking about how to cope than ethnic minority girls, $\chi^2(1, N = 35) = 5.27$, Cramer's $V = .39$, $p = .022$. There were not significant differences in emotional reassurance, discussion of discrimination, sharing a similar story, or derogation of perpetrator.

Relation of Social Support Themes to Self-Esteem

In the last set of analyses, we examined social support themes in relation to self-esteem. We tested seven dichotomous predictors. The following 6 predictors were coded for their presence or absence in the conversations: talk to others, emotional reassurance, talk of discrimination, similar story, derogation of perpetrator, and discussion of coping. One-way ANOVAs were conducted to examine whether specific conversational themes were related to self-esteem. There was only one significant finding: girls who reported emotional support as an aspect of their conversation reported significantly higher self-esteem ($M = 4.02$, $SD = .61$) than those who did not ($M = 3.50$, $SD = .83$), $F(1, 34) = 4.46$, $\eta^2 = .12$, $p = .042$.

Discussion

Adolescent girls' experiences of discrimination and their subsequent conversations about the experiences were elicited with personal narratives. Most girls in the sample were able to recount a salient incident of discrimination. In fact, all of the ethnic-minority girls were able to do so, suggesting that being a member of multiple disadvantaged groups may put one at risk for more discrimination (e.g., sexism and racism) and/or raise awareness of discrimination (Buchanan & Ormerod, 2002; Yoder & Aniakudo, 1997). Consistent with

previous research, most adolescent girls were aware of interpersonal discrimination (Fisher et al., 2000; Leaper & Brown, 2008).

One unique aspect of the study is that it allowed girls to describe an experience that might be due to race, gender, or some combination (i.e., intersectionality). Although our sample was not conducive to examining class-based discrimination, future research would benefit from examining classism during adolescence. In our study, European American girls were more likely to describe an incident in which they thought there were being treated unfairly due to their gender, whereas ethnic-minority girls were more likely to mention unfair treatment they believed to be due to race. Consistent with this finding, Seaton et al. (2010) found that Black youth were most likely to attribute discrimination to race/ethnicity over other aspects of identity (e.g., gender). In addition, we found a relatively large percentage of girls (26%) attributed discrimination to more than one social identity (e.g., gender and race). This supports research in social psychology suggesting that discrimination is not always attributable to one identity (King, 2003; Yoder & Aniakudo, 1997). Discrimination may arise from stereotypes about specific groups (e.g., Latina women). Given that most research examines each form of discrimination independently, this finding is an important contribution.

Coping With Discrimination

Little research has examined adolescent girls' descriptions of how they respond to personal experiences of discrimination. In our study, girls' coping responses included a number of approach and avoidance coping strategies. Many girls also reported one or more approach coping strategies such as confronting the perpetrator, trying to disprove stereotypes, or seeking help from others. Seeking social support was a very common approach, which parallels other research on girls' responses to discrimination (Scott, 2004; Timmerman, 2003). However, it was by no means the only coping strategy used and suggests that girls are likely to use multiple coping strategies in response to discrimination.

Over half of the girls also reported using an avoidance strategy through either ignoring the discrimination, avoiding the perpetrator, or avoiding the context in which discrimination took place. Another common avoidance strategy was feeling or expressing negative emotions or seeking emotional reassurance following the discrimination. The high percentage of narratives that included expressing or seeking reassurance for negative emotions suggests these events are distressing to girls. Expressing these negative emotions

to others may be helpful as research suggests that emotional reassurance from others may decrease the amount of distress associated with discrimination (Ajrouch et al., 2010). It's important to note that using an avoidance-oriented strategy does not necessarily mean girls are passively responding to discrimination. Coping in this way, such as ignoring a prejudiced comment, may be a deliberate form of resistance (Aapola & Kangas, 1996).

Overall, girls were equally likely, regardless of ethnicity, to use approach or avoidance coping strategies. However, there were group differences regarding one specific coping strategy. European American girls were more likely than ethnic-minority girls to confront the perpetrator (regardless of discrimination attribution). As members of a group with more status and power, European American girls may feel more confident confronting their perpetrator. To avoid further discrimination, ethnic-minority girls may choose to remain silent due to the pressures they face to either live up to stereotypes (e.g., "Asian Americans are the model minority") or resist them (e.g., "Black girls are loud"). In both cases, Asian American and African American girls may feel like "speaking out" will make them more vulnerable to increased threat. These pressures may be more likely to exist for racial/ethnic-minority girls in predominantly White schools (Fordham, 1993).

Social Support Themes in Conversations

Another component of our research was to solicit girls' narratives about any conversation they had to discuss their experiences with discrimination. Most of the girls reported talking about their experience of discrimination, and the majority of those who shared their experience told more than one person. They were most likely to talk with friends and/or parents. Other common sources were siblings and teachers. When a specific memorable conversation was elicited, girls were most likely to describe a conversation with a parent or peer. These findings suggest that experiences of discrimination, or at least salient experiences, are told to others.

Ethnic background moderated the likelihood of reporting social support. We found that ethnic-minority girls were less likely than European American girls to talk to someone following their experience. While social support has been found to be effective for many (Foster, 2000; Scott, 2004; Scott & House, 2005), recent research suggests that Asian Americans may be less likely to seek or benefit from explicit support from others (Kim, Sherman & Taylor, 2008; Taylor, Welch, Kim & Sherman, 2007). This points to the importance of continuing to examine ethnic/cultural similarities and differences in coping strategies.

The conversations were coded for several themes that support and extend previous research (Hughes et al., 2006; Phinney & Chavira, 1995). The fact that we found various themes suggests that social support is multifaceted and it is important to examine what exactly talking to others entails. The most common social support theme was how to cope with discrimination, which is a form of informational support. This is a common theme (i.e., preparation for bias) in research on ethnic/racial socialization (Hughes et al., 2006); to our knowledge, there is no prior work on preparation of girls for gender bias or other forms of discrimination. The girls in our study reported that their sources of social support were more likely to encourage approach-oriented coping than avoidance-oriented coping. This is a promising finding in that approach strategies, such as confronting a perpetrator and seeking help, may mitigate the likelihood of future discrimination (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006). Ethnic-minority girls were less likely than European American girls to indicate that they had a discussion about coping. By extension, European American girls may have been more likely than ethnic-minority girls to receive information about how to deal with discrimination. This interpretation, however, required testing in future research.

Emotional support or reassurance occurred in many girls' conversations about discrimination. Discussing emotions or being reassured by a listener was apparent in about half of conversations. Given that the reported experiences of discrimination often elicited strong emotions, it is not surprising that the conversations were emotion-focused. In fact, many girls mentioned that negative feelings were the impetus for seeking support.

Besides finding emotional support, girls often reported obtaining informational support in their conversations about discrimination. Two types of informational support that often occurred were sharing a similar story and discussion of discrimination. Sharing a similar story may be one way in which listeners try to discuss societal discrimination or provide information about the prevalence of discrimination. As expected, girls reported that peers were more likely than parents to share a similar story about discrimination. This may be because peers can relate to girls' experiences better than parents. Research on co-rumination suggests that adolescents, and especially girls, may discuss problems and the negative emotions associated with these problems at length (Rose, 2002). In the context of our study, sharing a similar story may drive the continued co-rumination. Talking about discrimination included labeling an event or person as discriminatory or prejudiced (e.g., "that comment was racist") or discussing stereotypes or discrimination more broadly (e.g., "Everyone expects that girls can't play sports"). In general, few conversations included either of these themes. Although some conversations

included a discussion of prejudice or discrimination, these were minimal and were not detailed enough for an analysis of whether discrimination was emphasized as an individual or structural problem. This may be one reason for a lack of significant findings related to this theme. In addition, talking about discrimination may be more common in emerging adulthood, when youth may be more aware of societal discrimination (Neff, Cooper, & Woodruff, 2007).

Although past research on social support has found that adolescents perceive peers as important sources of emotional support (Malecki & Demaray, 2003), research concerning socialization about discrimination has focused primarily on the role of parents (Hughes et al., 2006). Thus our finding that peers (e.g., friends, siblings) were a common source of social support is an especially important addition to this body of research. Although there were some differences, conversations with parents were very similar to conversations with peers. It is particularly notable that peers and parents were equally likely to discuss discrimination and possible ways to cope. This finding, along with research that has found that adolescents have more experiences with and a deeper understanding of discrimination than many parents think (Hughes et al., 2008), suggests continued research should examine the role that peers play in helping adolescents make sense of and cope with discrimination.

Relation of Social Support Themes to Self-Esteem

The third goal of the study was to examine how social support following discrimination was related to how girls feel about themselves. Only one conversation theme was related to self-esteem. Girls with higher self-esteem were more likely to report talking about their emotions or receiving emotional reassurance from others. This correlation is consistent with previous research suggesting that expressing emotions following stressful events is beneficial (Pennebaker, 1997). This is an important finding given that girls in various cultural contexts are often not encouraged to express negative emotions such as anger and distress (Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000; Trommsdorff & Friedlmeier, 2010).

Limitations and Future Directions

Our study is one of the first to examine how adolescent girls cope with actual incidents of personal discrimination as well as conversations they have with others about these experiences. Moreover, we considered possible experiences with discrimination based on race, gender, or some combination of

race, gender, and/or social class. This approach provides a more nuanced picture of how girls respond to discrimination and how others may support them. In addition to our study's strengths, we also note limitations and highlight directions for future research.

One limitation was that our sample was predominantly European American (54%) and Latina (30%), with smaller numbers of girls who identified with other ethnic groups. Because ethnic-minority groups were combined together, this prevented a comparison of different ethnic-minority groups. Ethnic and racial group backgrounds may influence adolescents' experiences of discrimination (Brown, 2008; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Way, Hughes, Rivas-Drake, & Mukherjee, 2008). In addition, our sample was comprised of girls from predominantly higher SES backgrounds, as inferred from their parents' education levels. Over 80% of the girls' parents had at least some college education, which prevented us from analyzing possible social class differences. Accordingly, we found few cited instances of class-based discrimination (and consequently dropped these cases from our analyses). Future research would benefit from examining ethnic and social class differences in experiences of discrimination and coping. Furthermore, although intersectionality research has increased among adult research (Bowleg, 2008; Cole, 2009), more work needs to be done to understand whether and how adolescents experience discrimination as intersectional.

We asked girls to report a memorable incident in which they thought they had been treated unfairly. The wording of our questions may have skewed their recollections toward more overt discrimination, which may not be indicative of all types of discrimination. Research on racism (see Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005, for a review) and sexism (see Leaper & Robnett, 2011, for a review) suggests that discrimination may be subtle and/or ambiguous, yet still have an important impact.

When asked how they responded following an experience of discrimination, most girls reported how they coped with discrimination immediately or shortly after the incident. In future research, we suggest considering if there are differences in short-term and long-term coping strategies and their consequences. For example, ignoring discrimination in the short term may allow girls to carry on with their everyday lives, but ignoring discrimination or avoiding it in the long run is most likely not adaptive because the problem may continue unchanged.

One more avenue for future research would be to examine other coping strategies such as critical consciousness or youth activism. These may give youth the tools to better understand discrimination in a larger context and work toward social change (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Mahaffy, 2004).

Although collective coping or activism following discrimination was rarely mentioned in the current study, this may be a more common form of coping in emerging adulthood. Continued research with youth and community organizations may illuminate factors that lead adolescents and young adults to become involved in activism as well as the positive outcomes associated with youth activism (McIntyre, 2006; Watts, Abdul-Adil, & Pratt, 2002; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997).

In conclusion, the current study illustrates that adolescent girls are aware of discrimination in their own lives. These experiences are often distressing, but girls use a variety of approach- and avoidance-oriented coping strategies to deal. Furthermore, emotional and informational support may serve as important buffers against the negative consequences of discrimination. It is particularly important to allow girls space to talk about their emotions following discrimination, help them to understand discrimination on a broader level, and to offer possible solutions for how girls might cope with discrimination. In addition, this research has implications including counseling and community programs aimed at helping adolescents who have experienced discrimination (e.g., Ginwright, 2007; Luft & Cairns, 1999) as well as interventions aimed at reducing prejudice and discrimination (e.g., Bigler, 1999; Houlette et al., 2004; Lamb, Bigler, Liben, & Green, 2009; Richman, Kenton, Helfst, & Gaggar, 2004).

Appendix

Questionnaire

Sometimes people feel they are treated unfairly because of their racial, ethnic, or cultural background, because they are a girl or boy (gender), or because their family is poor or rich (social class).

Please describe ONE memorable time when you believe you were treated unfairly because of your gender, social class, or race/ethnicity. First, please jot down a caption or one-sentence summary for the story that comes to mind. Then describe your experience and please include enough detail in your responses so that a listener would be able to imagine how you felt and what you were thinking, before, during, and after the events you are describing.

1. Please write one sentence to summarize the story.
2. What was your age at the time of the event?
3. Please describe the event in which you believe you were treated unfairly. Please include where you were, whom you were with,

what happened, and how you and others reacted. Include details that would help someone else, like a friend, see and feel as you did. Write as much as you would like.

4. What did you do to deal with this experience? Describe in detail what you did, and who, if anyone, helped you.
5. Have you shared this experience with anyone?
6. With whom have you talked about or sought advice regarding this experience? Please list everyone you have shared this memory with.
7. If you talked about this event multiple times, choose ONE memorable conversation. Who did you talk to? What is their relationship to you?
8. Please vividly describe the story of how you told them about the event. What led you to tell them about it and how did you tell them? What was their reaction and what was your reaction?
9. Did you discuss how to deal with the experience? If so, what did you discuss?

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