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Coping With Discrimination Among Mexican Descent Adolescents

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The current research is designed to explore the relationship among discrimination stress, coping strategies, and self-esteem among Mexican descent youth (N = 73, age 11-15 years). Results suggest that primary control engagement and disengagement coping strategies are positively associated with discrimination stress. Furthermore, self-esteem is predicted by an interaction of primary control engagement coping and discrimination stress, such that at higher levels of discrimination stress, youth who engaged in more primary control engagement coping reported higher self-esteem. The authors' findings indicate that Mexican descent youth are actively finding ways to cope with the common experience of negative stereotypes and prejudice, such that their self-esteem is protected from the stressful impact of discrimination and prejudice. Implications of these findings for Latino/a youth resilience are discussed.

Early theoretical models argued that the experience of discrimination directly negatively influenced mental health as a result of its effect on individuals' basic human drive to feel included in social groups and to avoid social rejection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1968; Rosenberg, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). However, research has demonstrated that discrimination does not affect all individuals in the same manner, perhaps in part due to the effects of individual differences such as personality characteristics, ethnicity, and/or gender identification (Crocker & Major, 1989; Porter & Washington, 1993). There is still a paucity of research on the experience of discrimination from the target's perspective, as well as research about the ways in which individuals actually cope with discrimination in their lives (Romero & Roberts, 1998; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). We argue, as others have, that person and situation factors are important to understand why some minority youth are negatively affected by discrimination and other youth are more resilient (Crocker & Major, 1989; Porter & Washington, 1993). In the current study we explore how Mexican descent youth experience and cope with discrimination, and how the coping strategies they employ relate to their overall self-esteem.

Discrimination Among Mexican Youth

Discrimination has been characterized as the daily hassles that occur because of the lower status of minority groups, including negative stereotypes or prejudiced comments, as well

as negative actions toward individuals based on ethnic group membership (Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Empirical findings indicate that discrimination has a negative impact on the mental health of U.S. ethnic minority children and adolescents by its relation to depressive symptoms and low self-esteem and well-being (Allison, 1998; Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006; Lee, 2003, 2005; Phinney, Madden, & Santos, 1998; Romero & Roberts, 2003a, 2003b; Sanders Thompson, 1996; Szalacha et al., 2003; Ying, Lee, & Tsai, 2000). It is important to understand the impact of discrimination among Latino/a youth not only because they are the largest ethnic minority in the United States and the fastest growing segment of the population under 18 years old (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001), but also because discrimination may hinder optimal functioning in childhood and adolescence and can negatively affect future adjustment and mental health (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001).

Studies indicate that Latino/a youth report discrimination as pervasive and associated with significantly higher rates of depressive symptoms (Chavez, Moran, Reid, & Lopez, 1997; Fennelly, Mulkeen, & Giusti, 1998; Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Hovey, 2000; Hovey & King, 1996; Romero & Roberts, 2003a, 2003b; Roberts et al., 1999; Sanchez & Fernandez, 1993) as well as risky health behaviors (Romero, Carvajal, Valle, & Orduña, 2007; Romero, Martinez, & Carvajal, 2007). Latino/a youth describe discrimination based on English fluency, immigration concerns, negative stereotypes, poverty, and skin color. Discriminatory comments and behaviors are most frequently received from peers, teachers, as well as other members of society (Fennelly et al., 1998; Romero & Roberts, 2003b; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). While studies have indicated the harmful effects of discrimination in Latino/a youth, little is known about how youth cope with the stress from these experiences (Romero & Roberts, 1998; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). More research is therefore needed to better understand the subjective experience of discrimination, as well as how youth employ coping strategies to deal with these challenges.

Subjective Experiences of Discrimination

Individual differences are often overlooked in the measurement of discrimination because it is assumed that the experience of discrimination for ethnic minority groups will be universal for everyone in the group. The majority of past studies have investigated discrimination in an objective manner, generally indicated by the number of discriminatory events experienced. Few studies have assessed discrimination as a subjective stressful experience, which would probe the degree to which an individual may feel stressed or bothered by discrimination and would more accurately understand the target's experience (Padilla & Perez, 2003; Romero & Roberts, 2003b; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of stress and coping

posits that the subjective perception of stress is a result of the interaction between situational contexts and person characteristics, and it is necessary to assess the stress beyond simply identifying whether the event occurred. This framework is useful because it allows for individual differences; thus, we can avoid assumptions that the experience of discrimination is the same for all individuals. The measurement of the subjective experience of discrimination as a stressor may improve our understanding of within-group variance about the influence of discrimination on mental health.

Coping With Discrimination

Discrimination experiences challenge the adolescent target and require different types of efforts to manage the stress. Compas and colleagues have discussed coping among children and adolescents and provided a framework that further elucidates coping processes by describing dimensions of control and engagement with stressors (Compas, Champion, & Reeslund, 2005; Compas et al., 2001). They describe primary control engagement coping strategies, which involve direct coping with the stressor or one's emotions and include problem solving, emotional expression, and emotional modulation. Secondary control coping relates to accommodation strategies such as acceptance, cognitive restructuring, and distraction. Disengagement coping is coping that distances one's thoughts, emotions, and physical presence from the stressor, such as denial and wishful thinking. Finally, involuntary engagement coping can be considered automatic responses to stress such as emotional reactivity, and involuntary disengagement involves automatic responses such as escape and emotional numbing. Compas and colleagues have noted that effortful engagement strategies such as primary and secondary control coping are generally associated with fewer behavioral and emotional problems in children and adolescents (Compas et al., 2001).

Only a few studies have investigated how Latino/a youth cope with discrimination (Fennelly et al., 1998; Romero & Roberts, 2003a). A recent longitudinal study that investigated perceived adult and peer discrimination among ethnic minority youth (Greene et al., 2006) suggested that ethnic identity moderated the relationship between perceived discrimination and well-being. Specifically, ethnic identity buffered the negative effects of peer discrimination on self-esteem among Black, Latino/a, and Asian American adolescents. Furthermore, ethnic identity affirmation was found to be a resource for youth when dealing with discrimination from peers in particular.

Although the field is beginning to better understand the role of ethnic identity as a buffer of discrimination, little is known about other coping resources or strategies that adolescents may

use to deal with discrimination (Rodriguez & Morrobel, 2004). Furthermore, past research about discrimination has relied on objective indicators of discrimination rather than measuring the subjective experience and stress caused by these episodes. Research is needed to explore Latino/a youth's experiences of discrimination in their lives, as well as the coping strategies that they report they are using. In addition, it is important to identify the relationship of coping strategies that Latino/a youth use to self-esteem, to understand the potential benefits of these strategies on the well-being of adolescents. The current study will explore the buffering effects of engagement, disengagement, and involuntary control coping strategies on discrimination stress for Mexican descent adolescent self-esteem.

Method

Participants

A sample of 73 adolescents (11-15 years old, average age 13 years) were recruited from an urban Southwest community local middle school (79% of sample) and local community centers (21% of sample). No significant differences in basic demographics were found between the school sample and community center sample. The ethnic background of this sample reflected urban Southwest cities near border regions. The median family income in the neighborhood area where youth were recruited was under \$14,000, with approximately 39% single female-headed households and 80% economically disadvantaged households based on Department of Housing and Urban Development income limits and federal free lunch eligibility.

The sample was almost evenly split between females ($n = 40$, 55%) and males ($n = 32$, 44%); one respondent did not supply his or her gender. Eighty-six percent of the youth identified as Mexican origin (including Mexican American, Chicano, or Mexican National) and the other 14% were of mixed Mexican ethnic heritage (White or American Indian). The majority classified themselves as children of immigrant parents (49%), with 15% reporting they themselves were immigrants, and 16% reporting they were third generation, and 20% fourth generation or later. The youth were evenly split on language use, as measured by the Bidimensional Acculturation Scale for Hispanics (BAS; Marin & Gamba, 1996): 38% were English dominant, 33% were bilingual, and 29% were Spanish dominant. All participants' parents signed active consent forms to allow their children to participate in the study and all youth signed assent forms before completing the survey. All forms were provided in English and Spanish to all participants.

Materials

Demographics

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire that included items about age, gender, and ethnicity.

Language preference

The BAS for Hispanics (Marin & Gamba, 1996) language use subscale consists of six items that assess language preference with separate questions per language (English and Spanish) in reference to (a) being at home, (b) when with friends, and (c) when watching TV. A sample question is “How often do you speak English with your friends?” These items have a four-item response range (4 = *always*, 3 = *often*, 2 = *sometimes*, and 1 = *never*). English ($\alpha=.88$) and Spanish ($\alpha=.72$) preferences were dichotomized into “high” or “low” separately based on median scores. Three levels of language preference were created based on the following categories: (a) Spanish preference (low English, high Spanish); (b) bilingual preference (high English and high Spanish); and (c) English preference (high English and low Spanish).

Coping

The measure for coping was comprised of 21 items from previous scales to assess the degree to which participants used various coping strategies, including engagement and disengagement (Wills, 1986; Wills, McNamara, & Vaccaro, 1995; Wills, Sandy, Yaeger, Cleary, & Shinar, 2001). Respondents indicated the frequency with which they engaged in coping strategies by using a Likert-type scale (4 = *all the time*, 3 = *most of the time*, 2 = *some of the time*, and 1 = *none of the time*). Five items were included to measure primary control engagement coping, such as “think of ways to take care of the problem” and “talk to someone about my feelings.” The internal consistency of this subscale was .68. Eleven items were included to measure disengagement coping, “watch TV so I won’t think about it and pretend the situation isn’t happening.” The internal consistency of this subscale was .72. Finally, involuntary engagement coping was comprised of two items: “get angry” and “take it out on someone else by yelling or hitting.” Cronbach’s alpha for these items was .62.

Discrimination stress

The discrimination subscale from the Bicultural Stressors Scale (Romero & Roberts, 2003a) was used to assess the frequency and perceived stressfulness of various discrimination experiences. Eleven discrimination items from this scale were included (e.g., “Sometimes I feel it is harder to succeed because of my ethnic background,” “I am not accepted because of my ethnicity,” and “I do not like it when others put down people of my ethnic background”). The possible range of responses to each stressor are *does not apply* (coded as 0), *not stressful at all*

(coded as 1), *a little bit stressful* (coded as 2), *quite a bit stressful* (coded as 3), and *very stressful* (coded as 4). These items provide information on whether youth experienced the stressors (does not apply or is present) and the level of stressfulness (0-4). The internal consistency of the discrimination subscale for the current sample was .74. Mean discrimination stress across all items was computed by taking the average score over all items with a range of 0-4.

Self-esteem

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) was used to measure self-esteem. This scale is comprised of 10 items, of which seven were used in the present study because of time constraints. Response options range from 1 = *never* to 5 = *almost always true*. A sample item is "I feel that I have a number of good qualities." Four items were reverse scored. All items were averaged for a total self-esteem score. The scale has been shown to be reliable in previous studies with adolescents (Rosenberg, 1965, 1989), and specifically with Mexican Americans (Cervantes, Gilbert, Salgado de Snyder, & Padilla, 1990-1991; Joiner & Kashubeck, 1996). The internal consistency of the self-esteem scale for the study sample was .61.

Procedure

Surveys were administered to youth during a science/health class for middle school students and after school hours at local community centers. The survey took approximately 1 hour to complete. Bilingual/bicultural trained project staff administered the surveys. Surveys were available in English and Spanish, and participants had the option to answer the survey in either language. The questionnaire was first developed in English and then translated into Spanish by a professional translator. Local native Spanish speakers, following guidelines suggested by Brislin (1976), back translated the translations from Spanish to English. Six of the participants elected to take the survey in Spanish.

Results

Descriptive statistics for variables of interest can be found in Tables 1 and 2. As can be seen, each discrimination item was reported by at least 26.4% of the sample or more. The items with the highest prevalence rates were: "I feel uncomfortable when others make jokes about people of my ethnic background" (71.8%) and "I do not like it when others put down people of my ethnic background" (70.4%). The two most stressful items (on a 1-4 Likert-type scale) were "I do not like it when others put down people of my ethnic background" ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 1.56$) and "I feel uncomfortable when others make jokes about people of my ethnic background" ($M = 1.66$, $SD = 1.44$). More than half the youth respondents ($n = 46$, 64%) indicated at least one

experience of discrimination that they ranked at a level of 3 (*quite a bit stressful*) or 4 (*very stressful*). On average youth reported that they had experienced 5 of the 11 discrimination experiences ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 3.26$, range = 0-11). Only 11% ($n = 8$) of the youth reported no discrimination experiences at all.

Independent t tests were conducted to investigate age and gender differences in self-esteem, discrimination stress, engagement coping, and disengagement coping and involuntary coping. Age was dichotomized into early (11-13 years; 65.4%) and middle adolescents (14-15 years; 34.6%). No significant age differences or gender differences were found.

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that no language differences were found for variables of interest, except discrimination stress, ($F[2, 65] = 4.12$, $p < .05$). Bonferroni post hoc tests indicate that English-preferred youth ($n = 25$, $M = 3.70$, $SD = 5.23$) reported significantly lower discrimination stress compared to Spanish-preferred youth ($n = 19$, $M = 8.69$, $SD = 6.41$). No significant differences were found in discrimination stress for comparisons to bilingual youth ($n = 24$, $M = 5.82$, $SD = 5.62$).

Generational differences were found with a one-way ANOVA for discrimination stress ($F[3, 50] = 3.36$, $p < .05$). Immigrant youth ($n = 7$, $M = 1.5$, $SD = .80$) reported significantly more discrimination stress compared to fourth generation or later youth ($n = 11$, $M = .51$, $SD = .73$). Immigrant youth ($n = 7$, $M = 7.14$, $SD = 3.43$) compared to fourth generation or later youth ($n = 11$, $M = 2.73$, $SD = 2.49$) also reported more total stressors ($F[3, 50] = 3.27$, $p < .05$). However, there were no differences in discrimination stress threshold between generations based on one-way ANOVA. No significant differences for coping were found by generation.

Pearson product-moment correlation was conducted with all variables of interest (see Table 2). Discrimination stress was significantly associated with primary control engagement coping ($r = .26$, $p < .05$) and disengagement coping ($r = .30$, $p < .05$), but not involuntary engagement coping. Higher self-esteem was significantly related to less discrimination stress ($r = -.34$, $p < .001$) and more primary control engagement coping ($r = .23$, $p < .05$).

The main and interactive effects of discrimination stress and coping on self-esteem were assessed using hierarchical multiple regression (see Table 3). First the main effects, discrimination stress and primary control engagement strategies were entered into the regression equation in steps 1 and 2. Next, the two-way interaction of discrimination stress and primary control engagement coping was entered. As can be seen in Table 3, the main effect of discrimination stress ($\beta = -.45$) was significant, accounting for 10% of the variance in self-esteem. The main effect of primary control engagement coping was also significant ($\beta = .29$), accounting

for an additional 10.5% of the variance in self-esteem. The interaction between discrimination stress and primary control engagement coping was significant ($\beta=.25$), revealing incremental utility by accounting for an additional 5% of the variance, resulting in a total adjusted R^2 of .26. To examine the form of the interaction, we computed median splits of discrimination stress and primary control engagement coping scores and generated separate discrimination stress-self-esteem lines for individuals high and low on primary control engagement coping. As shown in Figure 1, at higher levels of discrimination, youth who engaged in high primary control engagement coping also reported higher self-esteem, and those with low levels of primary control engagement coping strategies reported significantly lower self-esteem.

The same approach to hierarchical multiple linear regressions was conducted with disengagement coping and with involuntary coping. However, results indicated that no significant main effects were found for either type of coping in relation to self-esteem. A significant main effect of discrimination stress was found in both models (see Table 3).

Discussion

The current study explored the relationship among discrimination stress, coping strategies, and self-esteem among Mexican descent adolescents in an effort to identify positive resources that might help youth as they face challenges such as discrimination (Lopez et al., 2002; Rodriguez & Morrobel, 2004). Results indicate that the majority of youth did report discrimination experiences and, at times, with high levels of stressfulness. These findings are consistent with previous research (Chavez et al., 1997; Fennelly et al., 1998; Fisher et al., 2000; Hovey, 2000; Hovey & King, 1996; Romero & Roberts, 1998, 2003b), and highlight the pervasive nature of prejudice that still plagues the lives of many ethnic minority youth. Higher discrimination stress was associated with lower self-esteem; however, a high level of engagement coping reduced the negative effect of high levels of discrimination stress on self-esteem in the current study. Individual differences in the resilience of youth have important implications for understanding existing ethnic/racial health disparities.

Immigrant youth reported more total stressors and higher levels of stress when compared to fourth generation or later youth, yet no other generational comparisons were significantly different in the current sample. Previous research has documented that immigrant youth report higher total experiences of discrimination with this same measure (Romero & Roberts, 2003b), which is consistent with theory suggesting that immigrant groups may be targeted for greater discrimination than nonimmigrants (Padilla & Perez, 2003). In the current study, youth who reported preferring to speak Spanish reported more discrimination stress than English speakers,

but not significantly more than bilingual youth. Discrimination stress may be compounded for youth who are immigrants and who predominantly speak Spanish. While these experiences may be more frequent or intense for immigrant and Spanish speakers, the current findings indicate that the majority of youth did report discrimination and resultant stress that influenced their global self-esteem.

The negative significant relationship between self-esteem and discrimination stress in this sample provides additional support for the negative impact of this particular stressor on the overall well-being of Mexican descent youth (Romero & Roberts, 2003a, 2003b; Szalacha et al., 2003). Higher discrimination stress was associated with more engagement coping, more disengagement coping, but not involuntary engagement coping, similar to previous findings about Mexican American adolescents' coping with general stress (Kobus & Reyes, 2000). Finally, high levels of primary control engagement buffered the negative effects of high discrimination on adolescents' self-esteem, suggesting that this type of coping strategy was effective (Compas et al., 2001). Engagement strategies are generally associated with less behavioral and emotional problems in children and adolescents (Compas et al., 2001), and for Mexican descent youth, therefore, these strategies may also be a useful resource in times of discrimination stress in particular. As mental health professionals work with youth to help them experience well-being and manage discrimination stress, teaching about engagement coping strategies may be an important avenue for intervention or prevention.

The results of the current study advance the literature about how Mexican descent adolescents cope with discrimination. However, care must be taken with the degree of generalization based on these results, as causal effects cannot be assumed with a cross-sectional survey design. In addition, results from a convenience sample Mexican descent youth may not be generalizable to other Latino/a subgroups (Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2001) or other minority ethnic groups. The sample size of the current study had sufficient power to detect significance; yet, future studies should be conducted with larger samples over multiple time points. A second limitation of this study relates to measurement issues of coping and self-esteem among early adolescents. As noted by Compas and colleagues, because of the lack of standard coping measures for adolescents inconsistent research findings may be attributed to the usage of different definitions and assessment methods to measure coping. Finally, the low internal consistency of the self-esteem measure may be primarily due to the fact that only 7 of the original 10 items were employed in the current study because of limited time for youth to complete the survey during school hours. In addition, the Rosenberg self-esteem measure has been used reliably in previous literature with Mexican descent adolescents (Cervantes et al.,

1990-1991; Choi, Meininger, & Roberts, 2006; Joiner & Kashubeck, 1996); however, none of these studies have included early adolescents as young as 11 years old as were surveyed in the current study.

Given the existing mental and physical health disparities faced by Latino/a youth, further investigation into youth resilience and well-being is critical, particularly for those who provide direct health services to ethnic minority youth, including clinicians and public health service providers. Future research can explore variables that may moderate or mediate the relationship between discrimination and well-being, including skin color, gender, acculturative stress, and poverty. In addition, several researchers have suggested that ethnic minority individuals use cultural strengths to help buffer the effects of discrimination or other cultural stressors (Lopez et al., 2002; Sue & Constantine, 2003; Walters & Simoni, 2002); perhaps future research may further investigate culturally based coping strategies, such as ethnic identity, familism, and religion/spirituality among Mexican descent youth more specifically (Edwards & Lopez, 2006; Romero & Roberts, 2003a; Romero & Ruiz, 2007). It is important that researchers continue to study the complex influence of cultural contexts and the myriad resources that Latino/a adolescents use to cope with challenges in their lives to help promote their optimal functioning and well-being.

Authors

Lisa M. Edwards is an assistant professor in the Counseling and Educational Psychology Department at Marquette University. She received her PhD in counseling psychology from the University of Kansas and was previously a research associate at the University of Notre Dame. Her current research focuses on positive functioning and well-being among racial/ethnic minorities in the United States. Specifically, she examines the influence of cultural resources (e.g., *familismo*, religion, and ethnic identity) on well-being among Latino/a adolescents, ethnically diverse college students, and multiracial individuals. She is particularly interested in how youth and adults use strengths to promote positive functioning in addition to buffering the negative effects of discrimination and other bicultural stressors. She currently teaches graduate courses in multicultural counseling, assessment, and group counseling, and she is a licensed psychologist in Wisconsin. In her spare time, she enjoys traveling and spending time with friends and family.

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Appendix

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Discrimination Items (N = 68)

	Percentage Who Experienced Stressor % (n)	Degree of Stress <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Degree of Stress Range
A. I have been treated badly because of my accent.	29.2 (21)	0.65 (1.11)	0-4
B. I have worried about family members or friends having problems with immigration.	43.1 (31)	1.06 (1.38)	0-4
C. I do not feel comfortable with people whose culture is different from my own.	52.8 (38)	0.64 (0.68)	0-2
D. I feel uncomfortable when others make jokes about people of my ethnic background.	71.8 (51)	1.66 (1.44)	0-4
E. I have had problems at school because of my poor English.	26.4 (19)	0.61 (1.22)	0-4
F. I do not like it when others put down people of my ethnic background	70.4 (50)	1.85 (1.56)	0-4
G. I have felt that others do not accept me because of my ethnic background	40.3 (29)	1.11 (1.52)	0-4
H. I feel that I can't do what most American kids do because of my parent's culture	45.8 (33)	0.99 (1.33)	0-4
I. I feel that belonging to a gang is part of representing my ethnic group	26.4 (19)	0.56 (1.10)	0-4
J. I do not understand why people from a different ethnic background act a certain way	48.6 (35)	1.11 (1.40)	0-4
K. I feel that it will be harder to succeed because of my ethnic background	45.8 (33)	0.88 (1.17)	0-4

Note: $\alpha = .78$

Table 2: Relationships Among Variables of Interest (N = 73)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Self-esteem	—	-0.35***	0.23*	-0.03	-0.21
2. Discrimination stress		—	0.26*	0.30*	0.15
3. Primary control engagement coping			—	0.57***	0.10
4. Disengagement coping				—	0.29*
5. Involuntary engagement coping					—
<i>M</i>	3.51	1.01	2.49	2.28	2.09
<i>SD</i>	0.71	0.73	0.67	0.54	0.86

Note. * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3: Hierarchical Multiple Linear Regression Analyses Predicting Self-Esteem

Regression Step	<i>R</i>	Adj. <i>R</i> ²	ΔR^2	F(<i>df</i>)	Std. β	<i>t</i>
Model #1						
1. Mean discrimination stress	.34	.10	.10	9.02(1, 70)	-.45	-4.20***
2. Primary control engagement	.48	.21	.11	10.18(2, 69)	.29	2.70**
3. Stress x Coping Interaction	.54	.26	.05	9.11(3, 68)	.25	2.37*
Model #2						
1. Mean discrimination stress	.34	.10	.10	9.02(1, 70)	-.37	-3.08**
2. Disengagement coping	.35	.10	—	4.77(2, 69)	.09	.76
Model #3						
1. Mean discrimination stress	.34	.10	.10	9.02(1, 70)	-.32	-2.79**
2. Involuntary Coping	.37	.11	.01	5.47(2, 69)	-.15	-1.34

Note: **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Figure 1: Relationship Between Discrimination Stress and Self-Esteem as a Function of Primary Control Engagement Coping

