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**A Concomitant Examination of the  
Relations of Perceived Racist and Sexist  
Events to Psychological Distress for  
African American Women**

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*Conceptualizations of the role of racism and sexism in African American women's lives suggest that racism and sexism may have unique and interactive links to psychological distress. Path analysis was used to examine concomitantly these links for a sample of 133 African American university and community women. Respondents' self-reported experiences of perceived racist and sexist events and psychological distress were gathered. Results indicated that perceived racist and sexist events correlated positively, and comparably, with psychological distress; but when examined concomitantly, only perceived sexist events accounted for unique variance in psychological distress. Furthermore, racist and sexist events did not interact to predict distress. The substantial correlation between reports of racist and sexist events and the overlap in their relations to psychological distress suggest that the constructs of racism and sexism may, at least in part, be fused for African American women.*

In outlining the research agenda for the mental health of women from various racial/ethnic backgrounds, Russo (1995) stated, "We must develop paradigms that articulate the mental health consequences of negative life events associated with violence, poverty, and social inequality that characterize women's lives, especially those of ethnic minority women" (p. 389). Consistent with this position, counseling psychologists recognize that experiences of racism and sexism may be an important source of psychological distress for many individuals (e.g., Enns, 1993; Smith, 1985; Utsey & Ponterotto,

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1996). Indeed, research has provided empirical support for the notion that perceived racist and sexist events are related to psychological distress among African American women and men (e.g., Klonoff & Landrine, 1999; Klonoff, Landrine, & Ullman, 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996; Utsey & Ponterotto, 1996) and women of various racial/ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Landrine, Klonoff, Gibbs, Manning, & Lund, 1995; Moradi & Subich, 2002b). A limitation of much of this research, however, is that *women and African Americans* are studied with little specific attention to *African American women*.

Extant research on the psychological correlates of racist and sexist events has developed separately, and no study has examined the links of racist *and* sexist events to African American women's psychological distress; this is despite theoretical perspectives suggesting that racism and sexism should be considered concomitantly in relation to African American women's experiences (e.g., Greene, 1994; King, 1988). Indeed, in a review of 271 articles on interpersonal discrimination, Landrine, Klonoff, Alcaraz, Scott, and Wilkins (1995) found only 3 studies that examined multiple status dimensions, and none of these studies focused on psychological distress of African American women. The preponderance of unidimensional studies ignores (a) the reality that African American women's lives are likely to include both racism and sexism and (b) theoretical perspectives that point to the importance of examining racism and sexism concomitantly. Thus, theory-based research is needed to advance literature on the links of racist and sexist events to psychological distress for African American women.

Some early literature on the experiences of African American women conceptualized racism as the primary and most important source of African American women's oppression (e.g., Howard, 1980; Ladner, 1971). Such perspectives were challenged, and more inclusive perspectives that highlighted the importance of considering racism *and* sexism were introduced. Beal's (1970) notion of "double jeopardy" served as one such alternative perspective. Beal rejected claims that African American women's empowerment and attention to sexism would emasculate African American men and work against the fight for racial equality. She suggested that racism and sexism both have direct effects that combine additively to impact African American women's lives. Similarly, Jeffries and Ransford (1980) proposed that race and gender (as well as other status variables) have separate direct effects on social rewards (and presumably punishments). These additive positions highlight the importance of considering racism and sexism together and suggest that perceived racist and sexist events have separate and direct links to the psychological distress of African American women.

Still more complex conceptualizations have built upon additive perspectives. For example, King (1988) stated that the "multiple jeopardy" approach,

also referred to in the literature as the “interactionist perspective,” captures additive as well as multiplicative effects of racism and sexism. Landrine, Klonoff, Alcaraz, et al. (1995) described this approach as “a statistical interaction effect—that is, a ‘unique space’ or ‘unique outcome’ that cannot be explained or predicted from knowledge of the main effects for status dimensions alone” (p. 187). Thus, racism may intensify the impact of sexism, and sexism may intensify the impact of racism. Consistent with this approach, Greene (1994) suggested that racism may moderate the link of sexism to African American women’s mental health. For example, racist events may tax stress-ameliorating factors, leaving few resources for African American women to cope with sexist events (or vice versa). This in turn may intensify the link of sexist events to distress. Thus, the multiple jeopardy position subsumes the additive links proposed by double jeopardy and adds a moderator effect such that the interaction of racist and sexist events might have an incremental link, beyond their additive links, to African American women’s psychological distress.

Overall, then, each step in the development of theory on the role of racism and sexism in African American women’s lives represents a more complex perspective that highlights the importance of considering racism and sexism together (including their additive and interactive effects). Unfortunately, extant research has not examined racist and sexist events concomitantly. Nevertheless, findings of extant research on racism and sexism generally indicate that when examined separately, perceived racist and sexist events are related positively to psychological distress. For example, Landrine and Klonoff (1996) used their Schedule of Racist Events (SRE), a self-report measure of the frequency and appraisal of racist events, and found that each of these variables correlated positively with psychological symptoms in a sample of 153 African American participants (54% women). Klonoff and Landrine (1999) found consistent results in a cross-validation of this study with a community sample of 520 African American participants (53% women).

Somewhat different results regarding racist events emerged, however, from research by Fischer and Shaw (1999) with 119 African American college students (52% women). These authors operationalized mental health to include both distress and well-being. They found no significant relations between the frequency of perceived racist events (assessed with the SRE) and mental health or self-esteem for the total sample. A Fisher’s  $z$  test indicated that the correlation of  $-.14$  for recent racist events and mental health obtained by Fischer and Shaw was not significantly different from Landrine and Klonoff’s (1996) reported correlation of  $.31$  for these variables (the sign difference reflects the fact that the criterion measures in the two studies were scored in opposite directions). Nevertheless, the difference between the significance decisions in the two studies may have resulted from differences in

sample composition (i.e., student vs. community) and operationalization of mental health (distress and well-being vs. distress only). The latter possibility is supported by other findings of nonsignificant links between indicators of psychological well-being (e.g., self-esteem) and perceived experiences of racism (e.g., Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000) and sexism (Corning, 2002; Moradi & Subich, in press). Such findings suggest a conceptual and empirical distinction between the relation of perceived discrimination to psychological well-being and its relation to psychological distress.

Empirical literature on the link of sexist events to psychological distress generally has yielded consistent findings (perhaps in part because of the consistent use of psychological distress as the outcome variable). For example, Landrine, Klonoff, Gibbs, et al. (1995) used the Schedule of Sexist Events (SSE) (Klonoff & Landrine, 1995) to examine the link between reports of sexist events and psychological distress for 551 community women (approximately one third women of color). They found that lifetime and recent sexist events were related to premenstrual symptoms, total psychological distress, obsessive-compulsivity, interpersonal sensitivity, and anxiety above and beyond daily hassles and other stressful life events. Furthermore, lifetime sexist events were related to somatic symptoms, whereas recent sexist events were related to depressive symptoms above and beyond daily hassles and stressful life events.

Landrine, Klonoff, Gibbs, et al. (1995) also reported separate regression analyses for women of color (i.e., Latina, Black, Asian, and other ethnic minority women) and European American women. Lifetime sexist events accounted for 30% of the variance in total psychological symptoms for women of color but only 3% of the variance for European American women. Other events (e.g., daily hassles) accounted for significant amounts of variance in total symptoms for European American women but not for women of color. A similar pattern of results was found for premenstrual symptoms. Contrary to the results for the total sample, for White women, lifetime sexist events accounted for 6% of the variance in depression scores above and beyond other stressful life events, but this did not hold true for women of color. The small sample sizes (ranging from 20 to 41 for women of color and 45 to 71 for European American women) in these analyses are a significant limitation. Similar differences emerged, however, in a replication and extension of this study with a sample of 470 community women (approximately one third categorized as minority women). In the replication, Landrine and Klonoff (1997) examined the frequency and appraisal of perceived sexist events in relation to psychological distress. Separate stepwise regression analyses for minority women and White women indicated that in every regression the "best predictor(s)" accounted for more variance in symptoms for minority women than for White women, again raising questions about the

comparability of minority women's and White women's experience of sexism.

Finally, consistent with the previous work on sexism, Moradi and Subich (2002b) found that for a sample of 187 university student, faculty, and staff women (80% White), perceived lifetime and recent sexist events related positively to overall level of psychological distress. Because of the small number of African American women in their sample, these researchers did not conduct separate analyses for this group of women, but they noted that such analyses were needed.

Overall, the literature reviewed suggests that perceived racist events are related positively to a range of psychological symptoms (Klonoff & Landrine, 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996) and overall level of psychological distress (Klonoff et al., 1999). Furthermore, studies consistently suggest a positive relation between perceived sexist events and indicators of psychological distress (e.g., Landrine, Klonoff, Gibbs, et al., 1995; Landrine & Klonoff, 1997; Moradi & Subich, 2002b). Yet none of these studies examined concomitantly the links of racist and sexist events to the psychological distress of African American women. Thus, the potential unique/additive and interactive (as posited by multiple jeopardy/interactionist perspectives) links of racist and sexist events to psychological distress remain unexamined. Studies that focus only on racism or sexism neglect the complexity of African American women's experiences and ignore theoretical perspectives that highlight the potential unique and interactive effects of these experiences in African American women's lives.

Thus, grounded in conceptualizations of the complex roles of racism and sexism in African American women's lives, this study uses path analysis to examine concomitantly unique and interactive links of perceived racist and sexist events to African American women's psychological distress. Specifically, it examines the following hypotheses:

1. Perceived racist and sexist events have unique significant links to psychological distress.
2. The interaction of racist and sexist events accounts for variance in psychological distress beyond that accounted for by their unique links.

## METHOD

### Participants

A total of 137 African American women participated in the study (87 students, 4 faculty/staff, and 46 women in the community). Four surveys were

missing large amounts of data and thus were excluded from the analyses, resulting in a sample size of 133. The hypothesized path model in the study involved the estimation of 10 free parameters (3 covariances among exogenous [i.e., predictor] variables, 3 paths from exogenous variables to the endogenous [i.e., criterion] variable, variances for the 3 exogenous variables, and the disturbance for the endogenous variable). Given recommendations to have a minimum of 5 to 10 observations per free parameter (Kline, 1998), a sample size of 50 to 100 was required for the analyses. Thus, the current sample size was sufficient and allowed for estimating additional free parameters if needed to include potential demographic covariates in the model.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 72 years ( $M = 27.77$ ,  $SD = 12.51$ ,  $Mdn = 21$ ). Sixty-nine percent of the sample were single, and 31% were married or in a committed relationship. When asked to check the best descriptor of their current social class, 37% identified as working class, 33% as middle class, 13% as upper middle class, 10% as lower class, and 2% as upper class. The remaining 5% of the sample did not report their social class. Finally, 72% of the sample reported that their highest educational degree was a high school degree (close to 80% of this group were college students working toward obtaining a bachelor's degree), 17% had a bachelor's degree, 2% had an associates degree, 2% had a master's degree, and 2% had less than a high school degree. The remaining 5% of the sample did not report their level of education.

### **Instruments**

*Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI).* The BSI (Derogatis, 1993), a shortened version of the Symptoms Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90-R), is a 53-item Likert-type (0 = *not at all* to 4 = *extremely*) scale and assesses psychological distress across the dimensions of somatization, obsessive-compulsivity, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation, and psychoticism. Participants indicate the extent to which they experience symptoms such as "the idea that something is wrong with your mind" or "feeling easily annoyed or irritated." Scores are averaged across all 53 items to obtain a General Severity Index (GSI) that can range from 0 to 4. The GSI was used in the current study as an indicator of the respondents' current level of psychological distress.

The nonclinical adult normative sample for the BSI consisted of 974 participants (approximately 11% African American and 49% women). The GSI mean and standard deviation for women in the normative sample were .35 and .37, respectively (Derogatis, 1993). For all nonclinical adults in the sample, Derogatis (1993) reported a 2-week test-retest reliability of .90 for the

GSI. Moradi and Subich (2002b) reported an internal consistency reliability estimate of .97 for the GSI with a sample of mostly White university women. In terms of validity, Derogatis reported high convergence between the dimensions of the BSI and corresponding Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and SCL-90-R scales.

The BSI has been used as an outcome variable in several studies with African American women and men. Bazargan (1996) found that for 998 elderly African American women and men, the anxiety and depression dimensions of the BSI related positively to self-reported sleeping problems and number of chronic illnesses; women scored higher on these subscales than did men. In a study of African American and White women who had survived urban residential fires, Jepson, Pickett, Keane, Tax, and McCorkle (1996) found African American and White women's scores on BSI subscales or the GSI did not differ significantly. An internal consistency reliability estimate of .96 was found for the GSI in the current sample.

*Schedule of Racist Events.* The SRE (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996) is a rationally developed 18-item questionnaire that assesses the frequency and appraisal of racist discrimination. Questions include, "How many times have you been accused or suspected of doing something wrong (such as stealing, cheating, not doing your share of the work, or breaking the law?)" and "How many times have you been treated unfairly by people in service jobs (store clerks, waiters, bartenders, bank tellers and others) because you are Black?" Using a Likert-type scale (1 = *the event never happened* to 6 = *the event happened almost all of the time [more than 70% of the time]*), participants rate the items once for the frequency of racist events within one's lifetime (SRE-Lifetime), once for the frequency of racist events within the past year (SRE-Recent), and once for the perceived stressfulness of each event (SRE-Appraisal). Ratings across items are added to obtain scale scores that may range from 18 to 108 for SRE-Lifetime and SRE-Recent and from 17 to 102 for SRE-Appraisal (the last SRE item is not included in the Appraisal scale). Higher scores indicate greater frequency or stressfulness of perceived racist events.

For a sample of 153 African American women and men (54% women), internal consistency estimates and split-half reliabilities for the SRE scales were in the .90s (Landrine & Klonoff, 1996). Also, SRE scores were related to Krieger's (1990) measure of racist discrimination (Klonoff & Landrine, 2000) and independent of age, income, and education for a sample of 520 African American respondents (53% women; Klonoff & Landrine, 1999). Because of Landrine and Klonoff's (1996) conceptualization of recent racist events as the most proximal and salient predictor of psychological distress, the lack of clarity observed by other researchers about the meaning of

appraisal scores (e.g., Fischer & Shaw, 1999) and high correlations between SRE scales (Fischer & Shaw, 1999), only SRE-Recent scores are used in the current analyses. An internal consistency reliability estimate of .93 was found for the SRE-Recent scale in the current sample.

*Schedule of Sexist Events.* The SSE (Klonoff & Landrine, 1995; Landrine & Klonoff, 1997) is a rationally developed instrument and consists of 20 items that assess the perceived frequency and appraisal of sexist discrimination. Questions include, "How many times have people made inappropriate or unwanted sexual advances to you because you are a woman?" and "How many times have you been made fun of, picked on, pushed, shoved, hit, or threatened with harm because you are a woman?" Using a Likert-type scale (1 = *the event never happened* to 6 = *the event happened almost all of the time [more than 70% of the time]*), participants rate the items once for the frequency of sexist events within one's lifetime (SSE-Lifetime), once for the frequency of sexist events within the past year (SSE-Recent), and once for the perceived stress associated with each event (SSE-Appraisal). Ratings across items are added to obtain scale scores that may range from 20 to 120 for SSE-Lifetime and SSE-Recent and from 19 to 108 for SSE-Appraisal (the last SSE item is not included in the Appraisal scale). Higher scores indicate greater frequency and stressfulness of perceived sexist events.

For a sample of 652 women (38% minority women, 6% Black), internal consistency estimates for the SSE scales were in the .90s and their split-half reliabilities were in the .80s (Landrine & Klonoff, 1997). For a sample of 631 women (36% women of color, 6% Black), Klonoff and Landrine (1995) found that SSE-Recent and SSE-Lifetime scores correlated positively with measures of the frequency of daily hassles and major stressful life events. Furthermore, for a sample of 295 women (4% African American) Fischer et al. (2000) reported nonsignificant or negligible correlations between SSE scores and self-deceptive enhancement and impression management. Given Klonoff and Landrine's (1995) conceptualization of recent sexist events as the most proximal predictor of psychological distress and high correlations between the three SSE scales (Moradi & Subich, 2002a), only SSE-Recent scores are used in the current analyses. In the current sample, an internal consistency reliability estimate of .88 was found for the SSE-Recent.

### **Procedures**

African American personal contacts of the first author were asked to collect the data for this study to (a) maximize participation, (b) reduce potential data contamination related to possible suspicion and anxiety of participants toward White researchers, and (c) eliminate the potential effects of White

data collectors' intentional or unintentional racism. In all, one female university staff member, one female undergraduate student, and one male graduate student recruited participants for this study. We used multiple ways to recruit participants and included students and community members to increase the diversity of the sample. Students were recruited from student unions at a large Midwestern university. A few additional students were recruited from an art class, a history class, and a mathematics class. Data collectors also recruited their coworkers, neighbors, family, and friends to participate in this study. Participants were approached and told that the study was about the life experiences and well-being of African American women and given a survey packet only if they were interested in participating. Participants completed packets where they received them (e.g., student union) or in their homes.

Participants received written information about the study and then completed a survey that contained the instruments described above. The BSI was placed first so that reports of symptoms (the criterion variable) were not affected by reports of racist and sexist events; the order of the SRE and the SSE was counterbalanced. A questionnaire was included at the end of the survey to collect demographic information (i.e., age, SES, relationship status, level of education, faculty, staff, or student status). Participants received written debriefing and three dollars after completing the survey.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistics

No differences were found between students and community members on any of the variables of interest (because of their small number, faculty/staff were excluded from these analyses). Thus, all participants were collapsed together for all analyses.

Descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables of interest and internal consistency reliability estimates for the instruments used are reported in Table 1. Overall, our sample scored similarly to prior, primarily White samples on all of the variables of interest. More specifically, the GSI mean and standard deviation obtained in the current study ( $M = 0.69$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ) were almost identical to those reported by Moradi and Subich (2002b) for a sample of student and faculty/staff women ( $M = 0.69$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ) and fell between those reported for adult nonpatient ( $M = 0.35$ ,  $SD = 0.37$ ) and adult outpatient women ( $M = 1.40$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ) in the BSI normative sample (Derogatis, 1993). The mean obtained in the current study for SRE-Recent ( $38.00$ ,  $SD = 17.33$ ) was comparable to that ( $M = 40.99$ ) reported by Landrine and Klonoff (1996) for a sample of African American university students,

faculty, and staff (54% women; no *SD* was reported by these authors). Also, the mean and standard deviation obtained in the current study for SSE-Recent ( $M = 39.04$ ,  $SD = 14.01$ ) was similar to that ( $M = 37.32$ ,  $SD = 16.16$ ) reported by Klonoff and Landrine (1995) for a student and community sample of women of color.

### Correlations Between Variables of Interest

Consistent with prior literature, zero-order correlations of recent racist and sexist events to psychological distress were significant and positive, indicating that greater frequency of perceived racist and sexist events were related to higher levels of psychological distress. We followed Cohen and Cohen's (1983) procedures for computing the significance of the difference between dependent correlations to examine whether there was a difference between the correlation of psychological distress with recent racist events ( $r = .28$ ) and that with recent sexist events ( $r = .35$ ). No significant difference was found,  $t(130) = 1.08$ ,  $p > .05$ .

Correlations between demographic variables and psychological distress were examined to identify potential covariates to be included in the path analytic model. Only age was related significantly to psychological distress. Thus, age was included as a covariate in the model and a path between age and psychological distress and covariances between age and other exogenous variables were added to the path analytic model.

### Path Analysis

Following Baron and Kenny's (1986) recommendations for testing an interaction or moderator effect, the interaction of racist and sexist events was computed and entered along with the unique effects of racist and sexist events into a model predicting psychological distress. Before conducting the path analysis, the issue of multicollinearity was addressed. Aiken and West's (1991) recommendations were followed to reduce multicollinearity between the interaction term and other predictor variables. Thus, SRE and SSE scores were centered, and interaction terms were computed based on these centered scores. Next, several indices were examined to evaluate whether multicollinearity among predictor variables (i.e., age, SSE-Recent, SRE-Recent, interaction term) was a problem. Tabachnick and Fidell (1996) suggested that correlations below .90 and condition index values below 30 indicate that multicollinearity is not problematic. Myers (1990) suggested that variance inflation factors below 10 indicate that multicollinearity is not problematic. Absolute values of the correlations between predictor variables ranged from .04 to .69, condition index values ranged from 1.13 to 5.39, and

**TABLE 1: Summary Statistics for and Intercorrelations Between Variables of Interest**

	2	3	4	5	6	7	M	SD	$\alpha$
1. GSI	.28**	.35**	.19*	.15	-.15	.00	0.69	0.58	.96
2. SRE-Recent		.69**	-.04	.05	-.02	-.17	38.00	17.33	.93
3. SSE-Recent			-.19*	.04	-.18*	-.09	39.04	14.01	.88
4. Age				.24**	.31**	-.07	27.77	12.51	—
5. Relationship status					.01	.00	—	—	—
6. Educational degree						.07	—	—	—
7. Socioeconomic status							—	—	—

NOTE: GSI = General Severity Index of the Brief Symptom Inventory (possible range 0 to 4); SRE = Schedule of Racist Events (possible range 18 to 108); SSE = Schedule of Sexist Events (possible range 20 to 120).

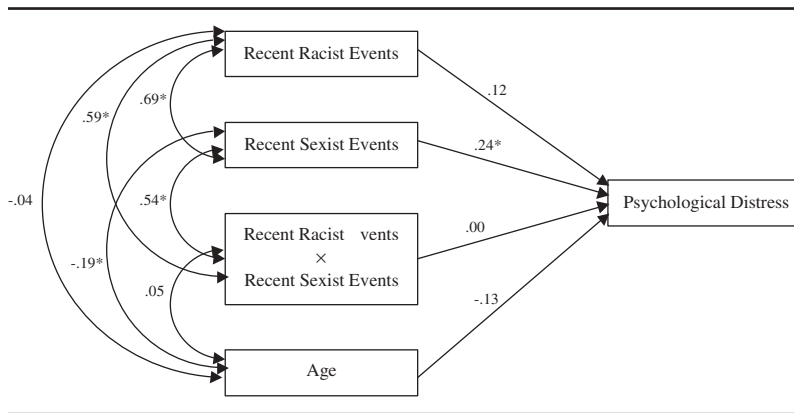
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .001$ .

variance inflation factors ranged from 1.08 to 2.22. Because these values were below the previously mentioned cutoffs, multicollinearity was not deemed problematic.

Amos 4.01 (Arbuckle, 1999) was used to test a path model that included (a) covariances among predictor variables (i.e., age, SRE-Recent, SSE-Recent, interaction term) and (b) paths from predictor variables to psychological distress. Maximum likelihood estimation was used with the covariance matrix of the variables of interest as input. As the model was fully specified, values for the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), and Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI; also known as the Tucker Lewis Index [TLI]) all were 1.0; standardized path coefficients are presented in Figure 1. Despite the significant positive zero-order correlations of reported racist and sexist events to psychological distress, when examined concomitantly, only sexist events accounted for unique variance in distress. Furthermore, there was no significant interaction effect in the model. The model accounted for 14% of variance in distress; thus, the standardized residual was  $1 - R^2$  or .86. This was comparable to prior findings of unique variance accounted for by recent racist (Klonoff et al., 1999) and sexist (Landrine, Klonoff, Gibbs, et al. 1995) events in psychological distress (about 10%).

## DISCUSSION

This study addressed the need to examine additive and interactive links of perceived racist and sexist events to the psychological distress of African American women (e.g., Greene, 1994; King, 1988). Consistent with results



**Figure 1.** Path model for examining the unique and interactive links of racist and sexist events to psychological distress.

NOTE: Values reflect standardized coefficients.

\* $p < .05$ .

of prior research with African American women and men (Klonoff & Landrine, 1999; Klonoff et al., 1999; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996) and women from various racial/ethnic backgrounds (Landrine & Klonoff, 1997; Landrine, Klonoff, Gibbs, et al., 1995; Moradi & Subich, 2002b), current results suggested that when examined separately, greater frequency of perceived racist and sexist events each related to greater psychological distress for African American women. When racist and sexist events were examined concomitantly (with age controlled as a covariate), however, only sexist events emerged as a unique predictor of psychological distress, and there was no significant interaction effect. Although perceived sexist events accounted for unique variance in psychological distress, reports of racist and sexist events correlated strongly with one another, and there was no significant difference between the magnitude of the zero-order correlation of racist events and distress and that of sexist events and distress. These findings of overlap in African American women's reports of racist and sexist events are consistent with those of prior research that used different measures than those used in the current study to assess racist and sexist events (Krieger, 1990).

Such overlap challenges proposed additive and/or multiplicative links of racism and sexism to African American women's psychological distress (e.g., Beal, 1970; King, 1988) and is consistent with emerging conceptualizations that critique the dichotomization of racism and sexism in African American women's lives (Collins, 1998). Collins (1991) proposed that various dimensions of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism) *intersect* to locate each

group (e.g., African American women) within a matrix of social organization. Each group's unique position within this matrix defines its unique experiences of oppression; that is, the whole of one's oppression may be greater or different than the sum of its parts. From this perspective, overlap between participants' responses to the SRE and SSE may reflect actual overlap or *fusion* in their subjective experiences of racist and sexist discrimination. For example, when an African American woman is made fun of or threatened with harm, called derogatory names, or faces employment discrimination (all items included in the SRE and SSE), she may attribute the event to the fact that she is an *African American woman*, not that she is *African American* or a *woman*. Indeed, a few of our participants wrote notes to this effect on their questionnaires. Similarly, Yoder and Aniakudo's (1997) sample of African American women firefighters rejected the request to distinguish between experiences of racism and sexism, claiming that such a distinction is artificial. In other studies, however, African American women identified both racism and sexism as sources of their oppression (e.g., Krieger, 1990). Thus, it may be useful to acknowledge experiences perceived as unambiguously sexist or racist and those that reflect the unique combination of racism and sexism. The image of "intersectionality" captures separate dimensions of oppression and their point of fusion.

This line of thought raises an important contextual factor to consider—that language may have influenced African American women's descriptions of their experiences and methodologies used in prior studies. More specifically, the words *racism* and *sexism* are common examples of forms of discrimination, but no everyday (i.e., nonacademic) terminology exists that captures African American women's unique experiences of discrimination that are shaped by fusion of racism and sexism. Research participants and clients may experience "fusions" but may not have the words to describe their experiences to counselors/researchers. Similarly, researchers and counselors may fall back on words they understand and believe others will understand. This lack of constructs/terminology may have resulted in researchers' asking participants, who in turn complied, to describe experiences of racism and sexism separately. This pattern leaves complex questions, such as what is the link of the fusion of racism and sexism to psychological distress for African American women, unexplored and unanswered. Lack of everyday terminology itself may reflect a form of oppression that silences African American women's unique experiences.

To this end, some social scientists have developed terms such as *ethgender* (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996) and *gendered racism* (Essed, 1991; St. Jean & Feagin, 1997) to reflect fusion of race and gender in African American women's identities and experiences. Operationalizing these concepts may facilitate research on the link of African American women's unique

experiences of discrimination to distress. A key in such an endeavor may be to work toward understanding the process of intersecting identities/oppressions and allowing salient constructs (e.g., ethgender, gendered racism) to emerge through research methods such as grounded theory analysis.

In addition to the intersectionist interpretation, alternative interpretations of the current findings also must be considered. The shared variance among reports of racism, sexism, and psychological distress may be explained by the general tendency to perceive and report stress (e.g., neuroticism). Those who have a tendency to perceive stress in general also may be likely to report high levels of racist events, sexist events, and psychological distress. If this is the case, one would expect equally sizeable links between the variables assessed in this study and other measures of daily stressors. Contrary to this expectation, correlations between reports of sexist events and reports of general life stress and hassles were in the .20s (much lower than the correlation between sexist and racist events found in the current study), and perceived racist and sexist events each accounted for unique variance in psychological distress beyond that accounted for by general life stress and hassles (e.g., Klonoff et al., 1999; Landrine, Klonoff, Alcaraz, et al., 1995).

Another possibility is that the link between racist and sexist events reflects shared method or error variance. Indeed, there are some similarities in items and instructions for the SRE and the SSE. Differences also exist in the item content of the SRE and SSE that capture experiences more unique to African American individuals (e.g., accusations of stealing, cheating, or breaking the law) and women (e.g., inappropriate or unwanted sexual advances). Also, as noted above, the correlation between reports of sexist events and general life stress/daily hassles (Landrine, Klonoff, Alcaraz, et al., 1995) was found to be much lower than that between reports of sexist events and racist events found in the current study, even though similar methodology was used to assess all three constructs. This suggests that the link between reports of racist and sexist events reflects more than just methodological overlap. Further research is needed, however, to examine directly the extent to which the overlap in reports of racist and sexist events reflects methodological issues.

Finally, the lack of support for additive or interactive effects in this study does not preclude the possibility that racism and sexism combine additively or multiplicatively for other populations or when other outcome variables are considered. For example, racist and sexist events may be distinct constructs for African American men and White women but fused for African American women. Measures of those constructs, in turn, may yield distinctive scores in some populations but not in others. Thus, cross-population and multimethod/multiconstruct studies of the link between perceived racist and sexist events are needed. Similarly, psychological distress as defined in this study captures only a small piece of African American women's overall health and well-

being. Additive or multiplicative effects may be found when other outcome variables are considered (economic well-being/hardship). Understanding potential additive and interactive links of racist and sexist events may be advanced by asking in what contexts, for what populations, and with what outcome variables is each link supported or unsupported.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

One limitation of the current study was its reliance on preexisting operationalizations of racist and sexist events. This was appropriate given that the hypotheses tested required separate assessment of these variables. Yet current results and emerging scholarship (e.g., Collins, 1998; Yoder & Aniakudo, 1997) suggest that the fusion of African American women's experiences of racism and sexism should be assessed. Extant research can inform how researchers build on available operationalizations to assess the diversity of perceived experiences of discrimination.

For example, Williams, Yu, Jackson, and Anderson (1997) used a general assessment strategy by eliciting reports of nine types of "unfair treatment." Asking participants to report their attributions for instances of unfair treatment (e.g., racism, sexism, fusion) may be a useful addition to Williams et al.'s strategy that clarifies the construct(s) being measured. Although Gomez and Trierweiler (2001) cautioned that using specific references to "isms" or gender/race to clarify participants' attributions may elicit inflated reports of events, they found, for the most part, no differences in rates of reporting negative events between gender/race specific questionnaires and the same questionnaires without gender/race specific references.

Another important concern is the extent to which items about unfair treatment in general address specific types of prejudice likely to be encountered by specific stigmatized groups. For example, items included in Williams et al.'s (1997) measure do not assess experiences of sexual objectification (potentially relevant to assessing women's experiences) or experiences of rejection resulting from disclosure of one's identity (potentially relevant to assessing lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered persons' experiences). It seems inappropriate to *assume* that measures developed to assess everyday prejudice events for one population assess sufficiently such experiences for another population. Specificity can be lost when the focus is on general unfair treatment. Thus, qualitative studies that aim to identify and operationalize African American women's and other groups' unique experiences of discrimination are needed.

Clearly, further attention to measurement issues is needed, but we caution researchers to recognize that the very nature of perceiving discrimination is subjective: Attempts to identify "accurate" versus "inaccurate" perceptions

are fraught with the danger of imposing researchers' definitions of discrimination on research participants. On the other hand, examining the variability in subjective experiences of discrimination may be a fruitful area for research. The extent to which an attribution to prejudice is made, the type of prejudice attribution (e.g., sexist or racist event), the target's certainty about that attribution, and the perceived stressfulness of the event each may have implications for psychological distress; each of these variables in turn may moderate or mediate the link between the event and psychological distress. The role of contextual variables in persons' perceptions of racist and sexist events also merits study. Race and gender of a perpetrator and racial and/or gender identity development of a target may influence each of the aforementioned variables. For example, Moradi and Subich (2002b) found feminist identity development attitudes were related to reports of perceived sexist events; perhaps targets' attitudes predispose them to interpret and report negative events as discriminatory or not.

In addition to the complexities of measuring discrimination events, limitations to the generalizability of the current findings should be considered. Overall, the present sample was relatively young, more than 70% reported that the highest level of education they attained was a high school degree, and the majority of this group was in the process of obtaining a college degree. Extension of the present findings to older African American women who represent a wider range of educational backgrounds seems important. Indeed, age was examined as a covariate in the current study, but a more comprehensive assessment of background variables may identify other important predictors of African American women's psychological distress and reports of racist and sexist events. Also, we used only one indicator of psychological distress, and research using multiple measures is needed. Such research would benefit from attending to the potential protective role of well-being in the discrimination-distress link (e.g., Moradi & Subich, in press). Other potential protective factors, such as religious involvement, volunteer work, and use of social support networks (Adelmann, 1993), also need to be explored. These variables, as well as various coping strategies, may explain additional variance in African American women's psychological distress and/or moderate the discrimination-distress link.

### **Implications for Practice**

Despite the limitations of the current study, its findings point to some implications for practice. The significant links of perceived racist and sexist events to psychological distress suggest that counselors/therapists should integrate understanding of African American women clients' experiences of racism and sexism into case conceptualizations, treatment planning, and

interventions. Scholarship that addresses the experiences of African American women (e.g., Essed, 1991; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; See, 1998; St. Jean & Feagin, 1997) may be helpful to this end. The magnitude of the correlations we obtained between racist/sexist events and psychological distress (around .3) suggests that other factors (e.g., social support, personality, coping) clearly must be considered as well.

Furthermore, current findings of overlap in African American women's reports of racist and sexist events and the emerging "intersectionist" scholarship suggest that practitioners should avoid dichotomizing their African American women clients' experiences of racism and sexism. Rather, exploring such experiences must be informed by each client's subjective experiences/worldview. Attention to racial (e.g., Cross, 1971; Helms, 1984), feminist (Downing & Roush, 1985), and womanist (Ossana, Helms, & Leonard, 1992) identity development can inform counselors/therapists understanding of the salience of racism and sexism for their clients.

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