

A Longitudinal Analysis of How Perceived Discrimination Gets Under the Skin: Investigating Gender and Racial/Ethnic Differences*

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Abstract

There are three gaps in our understanding of the relationship between perceived discrimination and health: (1) the long-term direct effect of perceived discrimination on health is little known, (2) the pathways linking these two concepts are under-explored, and (3) it remains unclear if there is any gender or race/ethnicity difference in these

Received September 29, 2018; accepted March 20, 2019; last revised March 23, 2019

Proofreaders: Chih-wei Wu, Yi-Han Huang, Wen-chi Chang

* Tse-Chuan Yang conceived the study, planned the analysis, and writing the manuscript. Feinuo Sun prepared the data files, performed the analysis, and participated in writing.

relationships. To fill these gaps, this study applies a recently developed mediation analysis technique to the Americans' Changing Lives longitudinal data (N=1,163) and investigates whether self-esteem and social support mediate the adverse impact of perceived discrimination on self-rated health. Three major findings are obtained. First, an individual's experience of discrimination, even a decade ago, has a significant and negative effect on self-rated health via relationship that cannot be fully explained by variations in individual characteristics. Second, the self-esteem pathway plays a more important role than the social support pathway in mediating the relationship between perceived discrimination and self-rated health, with the former accounting for 70% of the effect, whereas the latter accounts for only 30%. Finally, though there is little evidence for gender or racial/ethnic difference, the self-esteem pathway is more critical for whites than non-whites. These findings suggest that perceived discrimination has a long-lasting effect on health and potential intervention should focus on the psychological pathway to prevent perceived discrimination from being a chronic stressor.

Key Words: health, perceived discrimination, social support, self-esteem, mediation