AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN’S EXPOSURE TO INTERPERSONAL RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN PUBLIC SETTINGS AND PRETERM BIRTH: THE EFFECT OF COPING BEHAVIORS

Objectives: To determine whether African American women’s coping behaviors modify the relationship between exposure to interpersonal racial discrimination in public settings and preterm birth (<37 weeks).

Design: A case-control study was performed among African American women delivering infants at two tertiary care hospitals in Chicago, IL between July 2001–June 2005. A structured questionnaire was administered to measure maternal perceived exposure to interpersonal racial discrimination in public settings and coping behaviors.

Results: A greater percentage of African American mothers of preterm infants had high lifetime and past year exposure to racism in public settings than their peers who deliver term infants; odds ratios (OR) and 95% confidence intervals (95% CI) equaled 1.5 (0.9–2.8) for lifetime and 2.5 (1.2–5.2) for past year exposure. Active coping, especially “working harder to prove them wrong” led to attenuated ORs interaction P value<.05 for lifetime and <.10 for past year.

Conclusions: African American women’s exposure to racism in public settings is a risk factor for preterm birth; active coping behaviors weaken this relationship. Ethn Dis. 2011; 21(3): 370–376.

Key Words: Racism, Preterm Birth, Coping

INTRODUCTION

It is well-known that non-Hispanic African American women have approximately a two-fold greater risk of delivering preterm (<37 weeks) infants than their white counterparts.1 For the past several decades reducing the racial disparity in preterm birth rates has been a national public health priority2; however, the mechanisms underlying African American women’s pregnancy disadvantage remain poorly understood and consequently the racial disparity in preterm birth rates persists.

Interpersonal racism against African Americans remains highly prevalent in the United States.3,4 Moreover, an expanding literature suggests that African American women’s exposure to interpersonal racial discrimination is a risk factor for poor pregnancy outcome.5–12 While many studies have used scales to quantify exposure to racial discrimination combined across several domains, such as school, work, public settings, medical care, and others, the studies that have looked specifically at interpersonal racism in public settings have found mixed results. A prospective study found that women who reported having people act as if they were afraid of them or as if they were not intelligent or receiving poorer service than others were more likely to have a preterm infant, especially if they had a high school education or less.9 In another study, when asked more generally about exposure to interpersonal racism in public settings, however, women who reported higher exposure did not have higher odds of very low birthweight.6 Therefore, the extent to which experiences of interpersonal racism in public settings is associated with birth outcome is incompletely understood.

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In discussing the relationship between preterm birth and stress, of which exposure to interpersonal racial discrimination is a unique form, Hogue et al suggested that there is a complex relationship between the environment, agent and host.13 Effective coping responses may reduce the duration and magnitude of the psychological and physiological stress response to experiences of racial discrimination and therefore attenuate or “buffer” the relationship between experiences of discrimination and poor health outcomes.14,15 Ineffective coping responses, on the other hand, may extend or enhance the stress response which could therefore increase the likelihood of having a deleterious health outcome. To our knowledge there are no published data on the potential modifying effect of African American women’s coping behaviors on the relationship between perceived exposure to interpersonal racial discrimination in public settings and birth outcome.

We, therefore, designed a case-control study to determine the extent to which African American women’s exposure to interpersonal racial discrimination in public settings is associated with preterm birth and whether their coping behaviors modify this relationship.