

# COPING WITH CHRONIC STRESS BY UNHEALTHY BEHAVIORS: A RE-EVALUATION AMONG OLDER ADULTS BY RACE/ETHNICITY



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## BACKGROUND

- Several potential mechanisms exist that explain the use of unhealthy behaviors to cope with stress
- Depression higher among Latinos, yet comparable between African Americans and Whites
- Past research has suggested that older African Americans engage in unhealthy behaviors to cope with stress and subsequently prevent depression

## AIM & HYPOTHESES

- **Aim:** To assess the role of unhealthy behaviors in the relationship between chronic stress and depressive symptoms among African American, Latino, and White older aged adults
- **Hypotheses:** Engaging in  $\geq 1$  unhealthy behavior(s) (1) weakens the relationship between chronic stress and depressive symptoms for older African Americans and (2) strengthens this relationship for older Latinos

## DATA SOURCE

- 2006-2008 Health and Retirement Study
- 6,479 adults >50 years old: 843 African Americans, 494 Latinos, and 5,142 Whites

## EXPLANATORY MEASURE

- **Chronic stress:** (1) ever threatened/harassed, (2) ever had a life-threatening illness, (3) ever had an accidental injury, (4) moving to a worse residence/neighborhood in last 5 years, (5) losing a job involuntarily in last 5 years, (6) robbed/burglarized in last 5 years, (7) any other upsetting event in last 5 years, (8) helped a sick/limited/frail family member/friend regularly in last year, and (9) an injury/sudden crisis/health problem in last year

## MODERATING FACTORS

- **Unhealthy behaviors:** (1) current smoking, (2) excessive/binge drinking, and (3) obesity
- **Interaction terms:** chronic stress and (1) unhealthy behavior index and (2-4) each individual behavior

## OUTCOME & COVARIATES

- **Depressive symptoms in 2008:** 8-item, short-form Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression (CES-D) scale
  - $\geq 4$  defined significant symptoms
- **Covariates:** age, gender, highest level of education, and depressive symptoms in 2006

## STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

- Multiple logistic regression, weighted, adjusted, and stratified by race/ethnicity

## SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

	African Amer.		Latino		White	
<i>n</i> (%)	843	(13)	494	(8)	5142	(79)
Characteristics	Mean	(%)	Mean	(%)	Mean	(%)
Depressive symptoms*	—	(21)	—	(31)	—	(17)
Stress	1.44	—	1.42	—	1.40	—
Unhealthy Behaviors*	0.84	—	0.67	—	0.64	—
Smoking*	—	(24)	—	(12)	—	(14)
Drinking*	—	(13)	—	(14)	—	(22)
Obese*	—	(47)	—	(41)	—	(30)

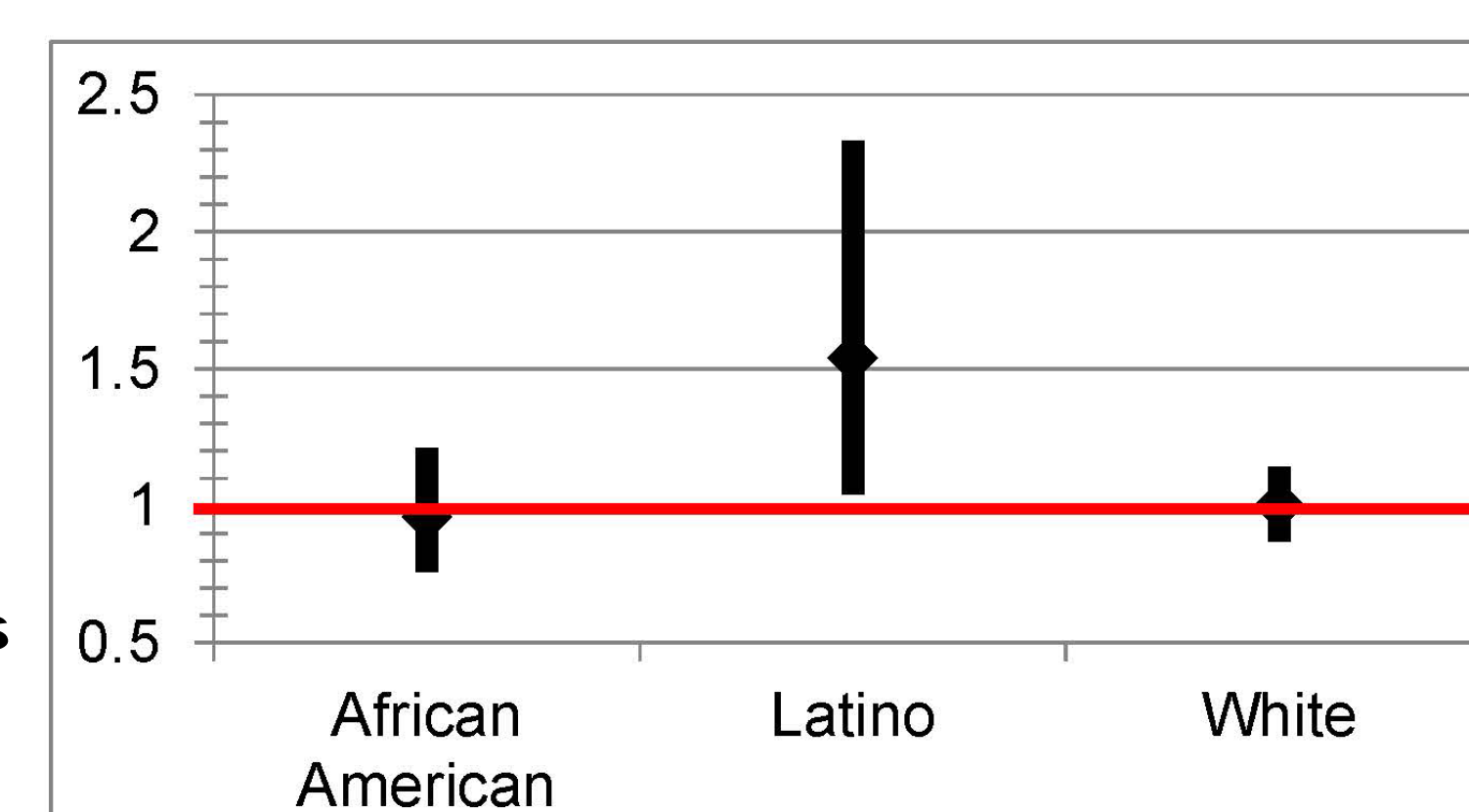
Note: Amer. = American; \* statistically significant

## RESULTS

### MODELS WITH INTERACTION TERMS

- Unhealthy behavior index strengthened the relationship between chronic stress and depressive symptoms among older Latinos
- No significant interactions between chronic stress and any individual unhealthy behavior

Figure 1. Chronic Stress and Unhealthy Behavior Index Interaction Odds Ratio for Depressive Symptoms



## RESULTS

### MODELS WITHOUT INTERACTION TERMS

- Adjusted for depressive symptoms in 2006 and all others
- Increased risk of depressive symptoms for older White smokers and mildly obese older Latinos

Figure 2. Current Smoking Odds Ratios for Depressive Symptoms

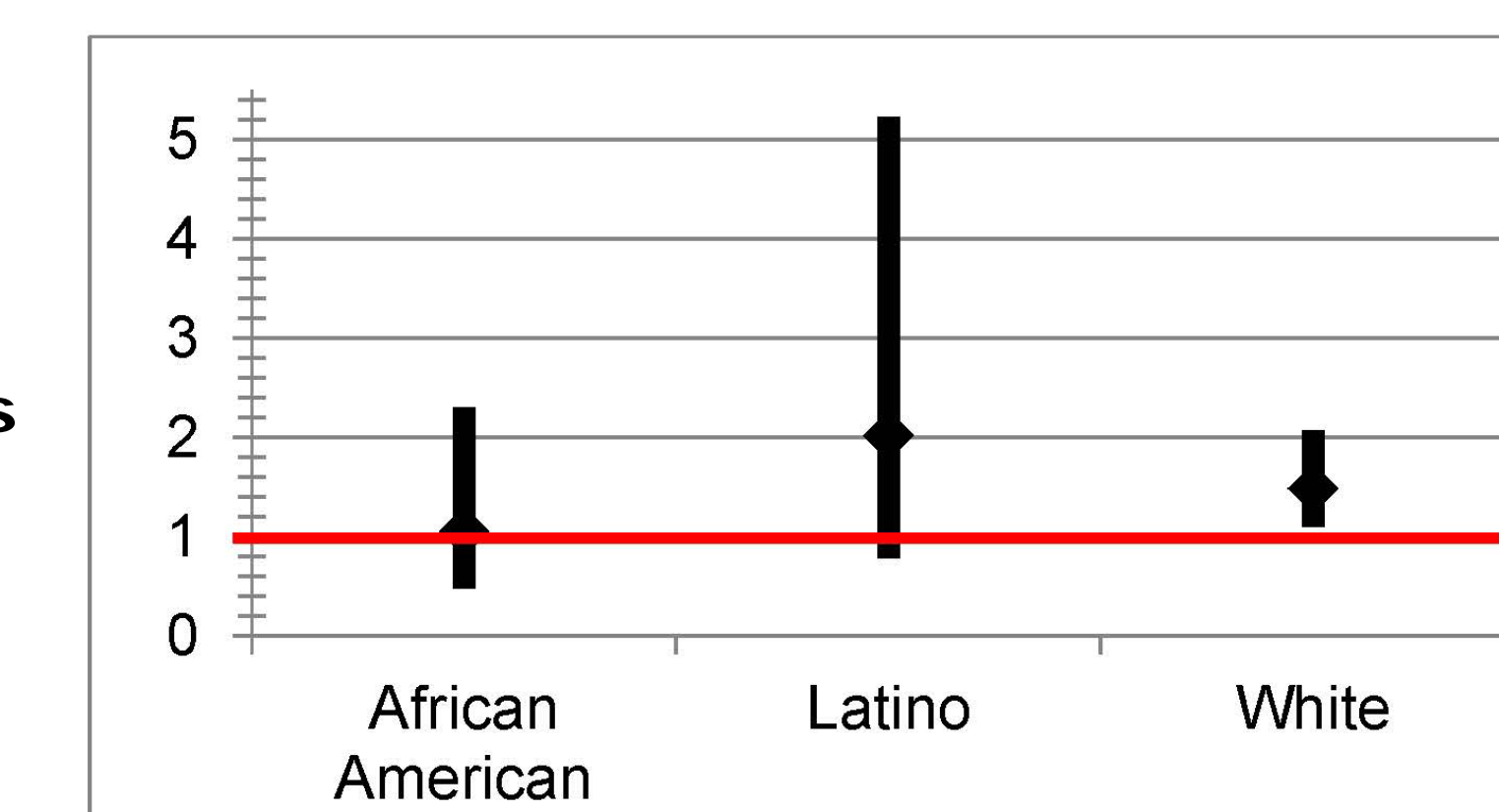


Figure 3. Excessive/Binge Drinking Odds Ratios for Depressive Symptoms

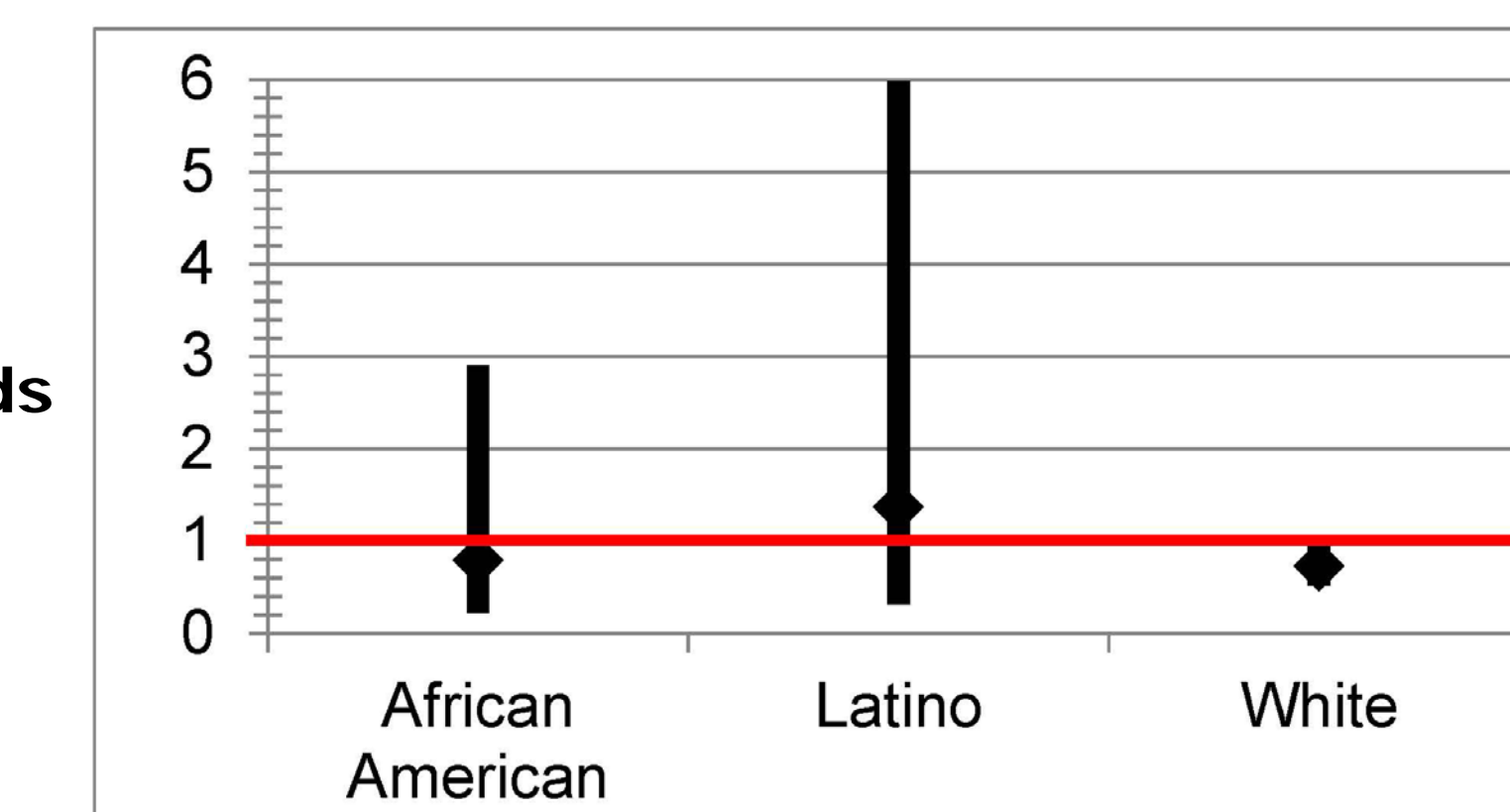
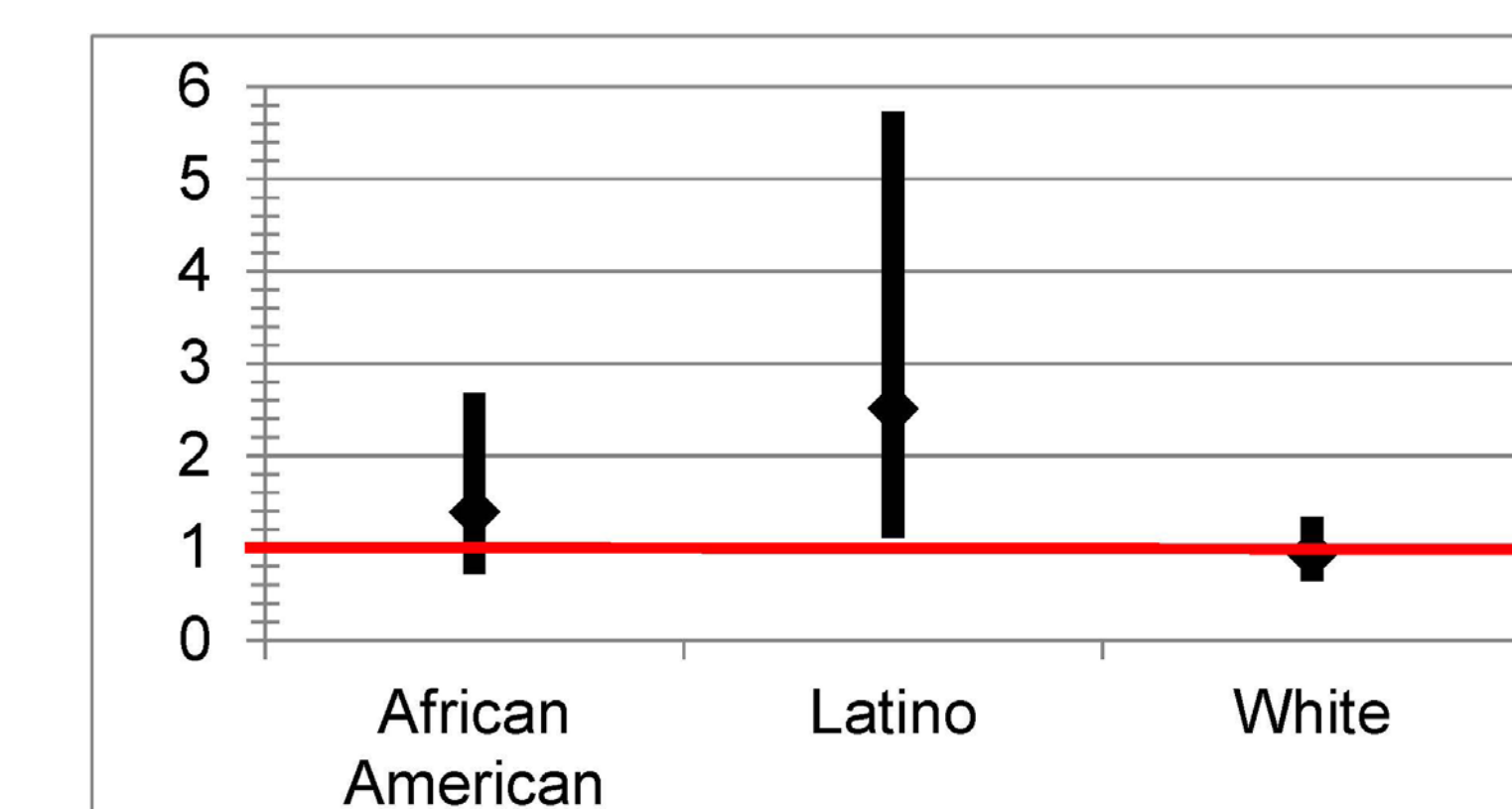


Figure 4. Mild Obesity Odds Ratios for Depressive Symptoms



## CONCLUSIONS

- Results do not support past findings of coping with stress using unhealthy behaviors to prevent depression
- In the presence of chronic stress, Latino older adults who engage in increasingly more unhealthy behaviors are at increased risk of significant depressive symptoms
- Limitations: Couldn't assess clinical depression, chronic stress and unhealthy behaviors assessed at same time point, only two years between baseline and follow-up assessments, and studied only adults  $\geq 50$  years old
- Future work: assess allostatic load and change in unhealthy behaviors between time points, focus on Latinos

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