

The Effects of Racism on the Development of Black Children

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Abstract

Prior research suggests that racism adversely affects children by negatively impacting the environment surrounding them. This can include social support available to them, including parental relationships. Under conditions of stress, the diminished access to support may potentiate known impacts on mental health and socioemotional development. The overarching goal of this project is to discuss the ways in which racism may affect the development of black children. As an initial empirical test of my larger model, I relied on a state-wide self-report assessment to examine the relation between race and sex, familial support, and the experience of bullying on feelings of sadness or hopelessness. As expected, Black children, female children, and children experiencing bullying all expressed higher levels of sadness. In addition, among children who had experienced bullying, Black children experienced significantly lower levels of familial support. The discussion places the specific findings of the current study within the context of broader literature.

The Effects of Racism on the Development of Black Children

The environment in which children are raised helps to mold the way they grow cognitively, physically, and emotionally. There are various factors that contribute to a child's development, including health care, mental health, environment (home and school) and parental care. The form and function of these factors can all be affected by racism, which is a system that structures the allocation of resources and opportunity within communities based on race, leaving certain groups of individuals at a disadvantage compared to others (Trent et al., 2019). Racism has serious detrimental effects on those who experience and observe it. A social determinant of health is characterized as "the condition in which people are born, grown, live, work, and age" (World Health Organization, 2020). Racism can affect components of health through determinants linked to sociopolitical and economic systems. The specific concern of this study is how racism adversely influences the environment of Black children, focusing on their relationships with their parents, their behavior and mental health, their access to health care and the condition of their home life. As a preliminary statistical test of these relations, the paper will examine the interactions between parental support, race, bullying (as a proxy for discrimination) and the mental health outcome of sadness and despair.

Low SES and Health Disparities

Socioeconomic status (SES) encompasses an individual's occupational experience, education level and income. These factors that can be adversely affected in specific communities due to racism. According to Williams and Collins (1995), discrepancies within SES due to racism can result in varying health outcomes, alter the quality and abundance of healthcare, and impact daily psychological and physiological functioning. African American children are at a higher risk of experiencing parental unemployment and living in lower income households, presenting difficulty in acquiring opportunities and resources that optimize health (Trent et al., 2019). Low SES environments have limited access to resources, education and finances that not only impact childhood development and health but can result in poorer outcomes in adulthood. Specifically, gaps in childhood development and readiness for school are associated with weak academic achievement and long-term productivity (Knudsen et. al, 2006). Racism is a major determinant of health that perpetuates health inequities. Clark et al (1999) illustrates the ways in which racism alters health as a stressor, where it may lead to negative biopsychosocial outcomes in minority groups. Considering that racism can constitute a stressor, prolonged exposure to stress hormones lead to inflammatory reactions that leave certain individuals more inclined to chronic disease (Cohen et al. 2012). Geronimus' (1992) "weathering" theory proposed that the health decline within African American people was a result of political marginalization and cumulative economic or social adversity considering stress-related biomarkers are more prevalent in Black people compared to white people.

The impact of racism has been linked to birth complications as well as mental health issues in children and adolescents. For instance, complications of low birth weight has been associated with maternal stress as well as perceived racial discrimination (Dominguez et. al, 2008). A study conducted with a small sample of low-income Black mothers found an association between self-reported episodes of racism and low birth weight (Collins et al., 2000). Racial prejudice can influence the quality of healthcare services based on the patient's perception of discriminatory treatment or implicit bias of the clinician, amongst other aspects.

Parental Experiences effect Socioemotional Development

Linked lives is a central theme of life course theory (Elder, 1994), emphasizing the interdependence of an individual's life on their social networks like family members. When changes, stress, or traumatic experiences occur in one person's life, it can affect the lives that surround them. This concept is important in explaining how the experiences of family, specifically parents, can influence how their children develop emotionally. There is a continuing association between poor maternal health and adverse child outcome, with maternal depression being correlated to cognitive, socioemotional and physical health through reduced interactions and trouble maintaining authority (Downey and Coyne, 1990; Goodman and Gotlib, 1990). Discrimination experienced by parents may influence parenting through beliefs, attitudes and behaviors or from parental mental health (Cheng et al., 2014).

Since child health and behavior are ingrained within various relationships, the effects of racism can have a rippling effect on children. In a study of African American children between the ages of 10 and 11, a relation between mother's perception of racial discrimination and poor parent physiological function, adversely affected parenting styles (Murry et al., 2001). Another

study of African American mothers found that factors such as low education, food insecurity, lack of money and poor housing was associated with maternal depression.

However, when racial discrimination was accounted for, none of those factors remained significant (Siefert et al., 2007). The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) examined a longitudinal association between maternal, family, and area-level experiences with racial discrimination and socioemotional development of children. The findings unearth the harm racial discrimination causes overtime both directly and indirectly, showing that poor maternal health is linked to slower response in children's verbal/physical interactions (Zilanawala et al., 2015; Bécares et al., 2015).

Mothers' increased exposure to stressors can impede their mental health and lead to more punitive or harsh parenting tactics (Simons et al., 2002). A study of African American adolescents conducted by Gibbons et al (2004), exemplified an indirect relation between racism and child development, where parental racial discrimination was associated with child anxiety and depression independent of the child's own personal experiences of racism. Other scholars have proposed that parental emotional support and sensitivity towards their children decreases as they become more stressed by their own experiences of racial discrimination (Sanders-Phillips et al., 2009), and that experienced racial discrimination decreases parents' likelihood of providing an environment that is nurturing and affectionate (Landrine and Klonoff, 1996; Sanders-Phillips et al., 2009).

Children's Mental Health and Behavior

Most of the studies that focus on the effects of racism on child health refer to mental, behavioral, and emotional health. There are several ways racism influences how children develop and research findings highlight the detrimental effects on children's mental health and behavior. A 5-year longitudinal study of 714 African American adolescents from ages 10-12 showed that perceived racism led to increased depression and conduct disorder (Brody et al., 2006). Another study showed that black youth demonstrated an increased level of distress regarding racist experiences, which resulted in internalizing and externalizing coping mechanisms (Scott & House, 2005). Internalized behavior is characterized as anxiety, depression and distress, while externalized behavior encompass behaviors such as delinquency and aggression. Stress from discrimination has been implied to be a central factor for the distinct health disparity amongst the Black population in the United States (Williams et al., 2003).

As discussed in previous studies, perception of racism can lead to mental health issues in children and adolescents but can also give rise to risky behaviors like drug and alcohol use. Anger as a result of racial discrimination was found to be a predictor of the average number of drinks consumed by black adolescents (Terrell et al, 2006). African American girls ages 11-19 reported a correlation between racial discrimination and tobacco smoking, implying it was mediated through stress (Guthrie et al, 2002). As reported by Gibbons et al (2007), children who reported adverse exposure to discrimination very early in life are more likely to demonstrate premature conduct problems and drug use.

Gibbons (2004) also found that 91% of Black 10-year-olds report occurrences of discrimination, which may have a critical impact on behavior later in life. Studies such as these additionally support the argument that racism hinders the growth and development of Black

children through multiple means. As an initial analysis of the core questions of interest, this study will examine how racial discrimination (bullying) may influence parent-child relationship through emotional support and depressive symptoms such as self-reported feelings of sadness within adolescents. The following hypotheses were proposed: (1) Perceived discrimination based on race will be associated with more frequent reports of sadness or hopelessness (a proxy for mental health) for African American adolescents. (2) African American students will report lower sense of familial support compared to their white counterparts. There are no specific predictions regarding how participant demographics other than race will influence results, but they will be considered because they could act as potential confounding factors.

Methods

Participants

PAYS is a survey completed every two years with students in the 6th, 8th, 10th and 12th grades in Pennsylvania. The participants in the current study are from the 2019 Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS), using the 10th grade survey results.

Procedure

Participants were asked to complete the survey after receiving consent from their guardian at home. The survey is anonymous, voluntary, and confidential. The survey includes numerous questions that range from the topics of experiences, knowledge, attitudes and behaviors. The survey was given out in the classroom setting. Once completed the school sends them back to the administrators of the survey.

Measures

To examine our core questions of interest, I focused on central variables that may impact a child's overall sense of well-being. In line with my research question, I focused on race, gender, the child's report of family support and report of having been bullied in the last 12 months. My initial research question wished to examine the impact of bullying due to race in the analyses. However, the distribution of positive responses to the question did not allow for a robust analysis.

Sex. Children were asked to report their sex as either male (N=35,425) or female (N=35,411).

Race. Children were asked to report their race across five categories. Based on my initial hypotheses, and the need to simplify the analyses, I focused on the two largest groups completing the survey, white (N=55,466) or African American (N=8,426).

Family Support. Students (N=66,868) reported on their relationship with their parents across 11 questions, such as "Do you enjoy spending time with your mother?" and "If I had a personal problem, I could ask my mom or dad for help." I created a composite score of family support by averaging across the questions, with higher scores reflecting greater perceived support. Scores ranged from 1 to 4, with a mean score of 2.95 (SD=0.68).

Bullying. Students were asked if they had ever been bullied, responding as “Never”, “Yes, very rarely,” “Yes, now and then,” “Yes, several times per month,” “Yes, several times per week,” “Yes, almost daily.” Since 73.6% (N=40,894) of the students reported never having been bullied, I collapsed all of the “Yes” responses into a single category (N=14,697).

Sadness or Hopelessness. This measure served as the dependent variable for the study. Students were asked “Did you ever feel so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that you stopped doing some usual activities?” Initial analyses found that 29.1% (N=15,984) endorsed the question.

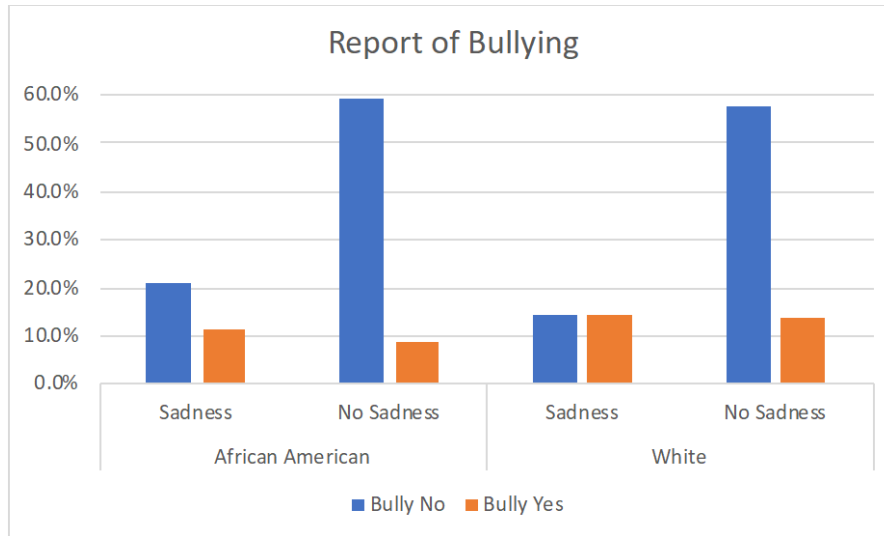
Results

My first step examined the descriptive statistics (Table 1) for the student population. This allowed me to characterize patterns in our variables of interest. To illustrate the pattern, Figure 1 shows the distribution of bullying self-reports by children. To aid in comparison given the large discrepancy in raw counts across white and African American children, the figure converts the raw numbers to percentages calculated based on the total number of African American and white children separately. I then examined the extent to which our variables of interest predicted endorsement of sadness or hopelessness using a logistic regression. I then probed any emerging relations using chi-square analyses and univariate ANOVAs.

Table 1. Distribution of race, sex, and bullying (Yes/No) for the students assessed in grade 10 in 2019 as a function of Sadness response (Yes/No). Percentages are calculated separately for each comparison category within each Sadness response group.

	Race		Sex		Bullying	
	African American	White	Female	Male	Yes	No
Sadness-Yes	1871 (13.1%)	12430 (86.9%)	10488 (66.7%)	5244 (33.3%)	7428 (46.7%)	8473 (53.3%)
Sadness-No	3928 (11.3%)	30937 (88.7%)	17154 (44.6%)	21302 (55.4%)	7035 (18.1%)	31727 (81.9%)

Figure. 1. Report of bullying as a function of race and reports of Sadness. In order to account for the large imbalance in sample size when comparing African American and white children, the percentages are calculated within each group separately.

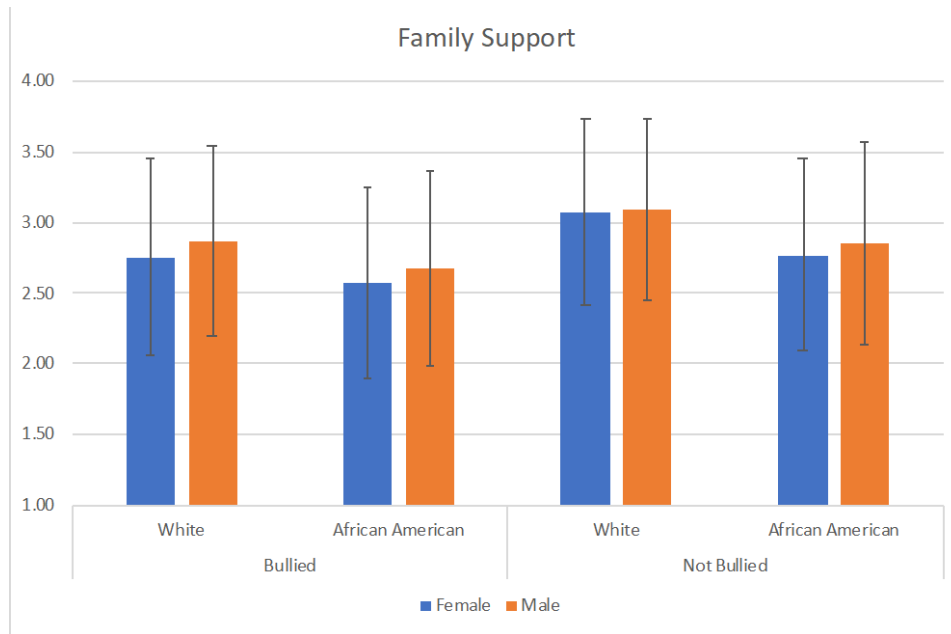


The core analysis was a logistic regression predicting endorsement of sadness as a function of race, gender, bullying, and family support. The findings (Table 2) indicated that race, family support, sex, and bullying all significantly contributed to the probability of reporting sadness, in line with our descriptive statistics. Of interest, there was a 2-way interaction between family support and race, $p < 0.001$. In particular, the univariate ANOVAs suggests that while both white and African American participants report more family support when not bullied (white: 3.08 vs. 2.80; African American: 2.81 vs. 2.61), the overall scores were lower for African American children and the gap somewhat smaller (Figure 2).

Table 2. Findings from logistic regression predicting Sadness response.

	Beta	Standard Error	Wald	<i>p</i>
Race	0.690	0.140	24.45	0.000
Family Support	1.398	0.060	538.84	0.000
Sex	0.855	0.023	1343.86	0.000
Bullying	-1.283	0.091	199.29	0.000
Support * Race	-0.296	0.050	35.10	0.000
Bullying * Race	0.068	0.112	0.367	0.545
Bullying * Race*Support	-0.002	0.032	0.004	0.953

Figure. 2. Report of Family support as a function of race, sex, and bullying.



Discussion

Environmental factors play a significant role in how children interact, behave, and process emotions as they grow. Experiencing racism can influence different aspects of the environment and potentially obstruct psychological growth. Institutionalized racism is a multidimensional construct that involves oppression and domination of a race or ethnic group, creating barriers to minority advancement and inclusion. Consequently, children in African American communities live in households with significantly lower incomes relative to white children in the United States. This circumstance poses as a threat to well-being through unequal access to services and opportunities that optimize health (Dominguez et al., 2008). Birth disparities along with mental health problems have been linked to racism (Cohen et al., 2012).

Racial discrimination can also affect parents’ interaction with children through mechanisms involving low-quality verbal and physical interactions (Downey & Coyne, 1990). This study examined the relation between familial support, bullying as a proxy for both discrimination and stress, and mental health outcomes. Here, we used the child’s self-report of sadness and hopelessness to reflect an overall sense of well-being and psychological functioning. In line with my core area of interest, the study focused on race as a potential moderator of the underlying relations. The rationale was that African American adolescents’ exposure to discrimination may be connected to increased reports of sadness, particularly if they have experienced social stress (i.e., bullying).

The results indicate that race is linked to familial support and discrimination among students with respect to child’s perception of support and bullying. In line with the hypothesis, African American students reported overall lower rates of support from family compared to white students. These findings should be accounted for when considering the reason for less support from family for African American students. It can be implied that racial discrimination experienced by family members can detrimentally influence parent mental health.

Poor parental mental health may have an impact on parenting by impacting parental attitudes, behaviors and beliefs (Cheng et al., 2014), as it has been linked to an increase in punitive parenting tactics (Simmons et al., 2002). Other scholars have proposed that parental support and sensitivity to children decrease when parents are dealing with their own experiences of racism. Less warm and caring home environments can harm children's socioemotional development which accounts for the relationship between family support as a predictor of sadness (Bécares, Nazroo, & Kelly, 2015).

Students report of sadness were attributed to variables such as race, family support, and bullying. African American children reported higher rates of sadness compared to white children. There was a strong association between race, bullying, and support that contributed to students report of sadness. Bullying and race were significant contributors to sadness. Consistent with previous literature, perceived racial discrimination is linked to depressive symptoms amongst African American adolescents. Some studies have shown that appraisal of racism led increased depression and conduct disorder (Brody et al., 2006). Increased distress in response to racist experienced has also resulted in internalization and externalizing coping mechanisms (Scott & House, 2005).

There are some limitations of the current study. The reliability of the results is limited due to self-reported measures of mental health and familial support. Self-reports are subject to certain biases or retrospective constraints. The use of proxy variables data could possibly limit the reliability of findings. The results are nonetheless valid because they correspond to previous studies and each variable was still accurately measured. The significant relations noted were also in line with prior empirical work and theory. Future studies should consider that children's self-reports were measured but we had no indicator of parental experiences of racial discrimination. Many studies have focused on parental reports of discrimination, and some have accounted for children, but few have included data collected from children as well as their parents. Further research should focus on racial discrimination, mental health and interpersonal relationships of both child and parents. Gaining more understanding about impacts of racism on family dynamic and individual development could improve life quality for marginalized ethnic groups and reduce racial health disparities.

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