What does it mean to be an African American or White adolescent growing up in a multi-ethnic community?: The influence of different contexts of racial discrimination on adolescent development

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Abstract

- In the present study, the following research questions were examined:
  - What does it mean to be an African American adolescent faced with racial discrimination?
  - What does it mean to be a White adolescent faced with racial discrimination?
  - Do these situations of racial devaluation have similar influences on African American and White adolescents' development?

- This study is part of a larger longitudinal study, in which 623 African American and 331 White early adolescents completed face-to-face and self-administered questionnaires.

- LISREL VIII was used to analyze the relations between 2 different aspects of racial discrimination (proximal and distal experiences) and 7 inter-related domains of early adolescent development.

- The results indicated that proximal experiences were negatively related to both African American and White adolescents' development.

- Distal experiences of discrimination were not as strongly related to adolescents' development as proximal experiences.

- There were some group differences in the relations between the 2 contexts of discrimination and the different domains of development.
Introduction

- In studies of child development, there is growing criticism of conceptualizing race as a monolithic unidimensional social category.

- Instead race needs to be viewed as a multi-faceted "context" of development that shapes human development via multiple pathways of influence.

- One facet of the context of race is adolescents' experiences of racial devaluation.

- Experiences of racial devaluation can be thought of as risk factors that may be manifested in settings at different levels in the ecological system.

- Some experiences of racial devaluation take place at a more distal level, such as stereotypes and societal/cultural prejudices.

- In addition, children and adolescents also may experience racial devaluation in their immediate proximal settings.

- These different situations of race-related risks may have different implications for development.

Rationale for Present Study

- While there is substantial research on adolescents' distal experiences of discrimination (e.g., glass ceiling), few have examined proximal experiences (e.g., everyday discrimination at school) which may pose a greater risk to adolescents' overall psychological adjustment.

- In addition, researchers have primarily focused on looking at the impact of situations of racial devaluation on adolescents' motivation and achievement. But these risk factors may influence other inter-related domains of psychological functioning.

- Furthermore, the social psychological research defines racial devaluation (or social stigma) as a contextual situation. However, most research have looked at these negative racial experiences in contexts where ethnic minorities experience racial discrimination and White adolescents have not.

- In the present study, we looked at the relations among 2 situations of racial devaluation (proximal and distal) and 7 inter-related domains of African American and White early
adolescents' development (motivation, achievement, self-concept of ability, self-esteem, negative mental health, negative peer group, and problem behavior).

**Research Questions:**

1. What does it mean to be an African American adolescent faced with racial discrimination?

2. What does it mean to be a White adolescent faced with racial discrimination?

3. Do these situations of racial devaluation have similar influences on African American and White adolescents' development?

**Method**

**Participants:**

- 623 African American early adolescents
- 331 White early adolescents

- They completed a self-administered and a face-to-face interview during 7th-grade (Wave 1) and the summer following the 8th-grade (Wave 2).

- They attended 23 junior high schools that were racially heterogeneous.

- The adolescents are participating in a larger ongoing longitudinal study of adolescent development (Eccles & Sameroff, Maryland Adolescents Growth in Context Study).

**Measures**

**Control Variables**

Gender

SES: Index with education, income, and occupational status

Ability: average 3rd- and 5th-grade CAT scores

**School Disengagement** (5 items) \( \alpha = .71 \)

"Most of your subjects or classes are boring."

**School Discrimination @ W1** (dichotomous)

"Have you been treated at school differently because you are (Race)?"

Prior Psychological Adjustment @ W1 (See Below)
Predictors: Discrimination @ W2

Anticipatory Future Discrimination (2 items)
"How much do you think discrimination because of your race might keep you from getting the job you want?"

Discrimination by Teachers (5 items)
"How often do you feel that teachers call on you less often than they call on other kids because of your race?"

Discrimination by Peers (3 items)
"How often do you feel that kids do not want to hang out with you because of your race?"

Outcome Variables

Grades

General Value of School (2 items)
"Compared to other kids your age, how important is math to you?"

Utility Value of School (4 items)
"Schooling is not so important for kids like me."

Self-Concept of Ability (4 items)
"How good are you in math?"

Resiliency (4 items)
"How often are you very good at bouncing back quickly from bad experiences?"

Depression (4 items)
"I am sad"

Anger (3 items)
"During the last month (including today), how often have you felt so upset you wanted to hit or hurt someone?"

Self-Esteem (3 items)
"How often would you like to change lots of things about yourself if you could?"

Problem Behavior
(11 items)
"In the past year, how often have you skipped a class without a valid excuse?"

Negative Peer Characteristics
(3 items)
"How many of the friends that you spend most of your time with think working hard to get good grades is a waste of time?"

Positive Peer Characteristics
(4 items)
"How many of the friends that you spend most of your time with do well in school?"

Method of Analysis

- LISREL VIII was used to analyze the relations between 2 different aspects of racial discrimination (proximal and distal experiences) and 7 inter-related domains of early adolescent development.

- We controlled for gender, SES, prior academic competence, disengagement from school, and prior adjustment from Time 1 for a given outcome in each of the structural equation.

Summary of Findings (See Figure 1)

- In general, proximal experiences of discrimination were negatively related to African American and White students' psychological adjustment.

- The magnitude of the relations between proximal discrimination and non-academic outcomes were equal to or greater than the relations between proximal discrimination and academic outcomes.

- Distal experiences of discrimination were not as strongly related to adolescents' development as proximal experiences.

- There were also group differences:
  - There was a stronger positive relation between proximal discrimination and negative mental health for African Americans than for White adolescents.
  - Proximal discrimination was negatively related to self-esteem for only African Americans.
  - Distal discrimination was negatively related to self-esteem for only White adolescents.
  - Distal discrimination was positively related to problem behavior and negative peer group for only African Americans.
Figure 1: Structural Model of the Relations Among Proximal and Distal Experiences of Racial Discrimination and African American and White Adolescents' Psychological Adjustment