Discrimination at School:

Latino and African American Male High School Students' Experiences

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Abstract

This study investigated male Latino and African American adolescents' experiences with racial discrimination at school. Participants ($N = 85$) were recruited from an urban public high school in southern California. Students completed paper and pencil measures assessing their experiences with racial discrimination. Overall, Latino and African American male participants had similar experiences with discrimination at school. Three themes emerged: (a) treatment in the classroom, (b) access/opportunities to college, and (c) interactions with school police. Results were discussed in terms of cultural stereotypes present in U.S. society and young people's awareness of discrimination in society.

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Not long into this century, ethnic minority residents in all major urban centers (e.g., Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Boston, Oakland, Seattle, Atlanta, Washington, DC) will equal or outnumber their European American counterparts (Gardner, 1996). Further, communities across America, both urban and suburban, are already far less likely to represent ethnic or racial enclaves than was once true. Legally mandated desegregation and an expanding economy have created communities that, while still typically rigidly segregated by economic class, are increasingly racially and ethnically diverse (Educational Research Service, 1995; U.S. Census Bureau, 1990a). Increased ethnic diversity means that members of local communities must now regularly interact across racial and ethnic lines in their daily lives. Such increases in inter-ethnic contact also provide increased opportunities for discrimination.

Racial discrimination, or the active behavioral expression of racism, is defined here as denying members of certain racial groups equal access to scarce and valued resources (Cashmore, 1996; Pincus, 1996), both material and social. This definition can easily be applied to discrimination on the basis of ethnicity as well. While all racial and ethnic minorities continue to be frequent targets of discrimination (Hacker, 1992; Sigelman & Welch, 1991), African Americans tend to experience the highest rates of discrimination from all ethnic groups (Gary, 1995; Mont-Reynaud, Ritter & Chen, 1990). Moreover, young people in particular often confront racial or ethnic discrimination as a regular part of their daily lives (Phinney & Chavira, 1995; Wakefield, 1998; Wakefield & Hudley, 1997). For example, Black college students were turned away from a familiar

chain restaurant by white employees who told them that the restaurant was closed, but white students entering after that interaction were seated and served (Los Angeles Times, 1993a). Another restaurant chain has been repeatedly cited for requiring Black adolescents to pre-pay for their orders and subjecting them to extremely long waits not experienced by white customers (Los Angeles Times, 1993b).

Cultural Pluralism and Relations in Schools

Multicultural or culturally pluralistic settings are often considered a panacea for the development of positive racial and ethnic relations. Yet the reality of discrimination is often overlooked when considering the benefits of culturally diverse communities. Cultural pluralism is defined as a pattern of social relations in which groups that are distinct from each other in a great many respects share a common set of institutions and some aspects of a common culture (Cashmore, 1996; Pincus, 1996). Cultural pluralism occurs when various ethnic groups' cultures are equally valued and coexist in the context of a larger society. In contrast, when cultures are unequally valued, ethnic and racial discrimination are often directed toward members of low-status groups (Brown, 1995). Currently in the United States, true cultural pluralism rarely, if ever, exists. Therefore it is unsurprising that legal desegregation and the creation of integrated or multicultural environments are unable by themselves to bring about an end to racial and ethnic discrimination.

School settings are an especially revealing context for understanding interactions among groups. Although many schools have become more ethnically diverse over time, they typically remain divided. Prior research (Feagin & Sikes, 1994) has found that university students tend to self-segregate by ethnic group into cliques and enclaves. Less

research has investigated this phenomenon in middle schools and high schools; however, self-segregation exists in these settings as well (Braddock, Dawkins, & Wilson, 1995; Tatum, 1997). Research revisiting Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis consistently suggests that simple contact between members of different ethnic groups often leads to negative attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors directed to outgroup members (Stephan, 1987). Thus, the act of desegregating schools may have created yet another context in which young people may encounter racial and ethnic discrimination.

The Present Study

The objective of the present study was to investigate African-American and Latino male adolescents' lived-experiences with racial discrimination at school. We examined past experiences of discrimination through free responses on hypothetical scenario instrument of responses to racial discrimination in various settings. We hypothesized that African American and Latino adolescents will report experiences of discrimination at their high school. We also hypothesized that Latino and African American students would have similar experiences of racial discrimination at school.

Method

Participants and Setting

Participants were male African American and Latino adolescents ($N = 85$) in ninth through twelfth grades (9th grade $n = 21$, M age = 14.21; 10th grade $n = 20$, M age = 15.42; 11th grade $n = 23$, M age = 16.61; 12th grade $n = 21$, M age = 18.01), enrolled in an urban high school in southern California. The sample was relatively balanced across ethnic group with forty-three African American participants and forty-two Latino participants. Prior research has convincingly demonstrated that males and females use

different coping strategies when confronted with stressful situations (Copeland & Hess, 1995; Patterson & McCubbin, 1987). To insure that our findings would be interpretable, given our relatively small sample size, we eliminated gender as an independent variable by selecting only male participants. Students attended a multiethnic school consisting of 69% African American, 15% Hispanic, 9% European American, and 7% Asian American students (California Department of Education, 1997). Twenty-five percent of the students attending the school were bussed from other areas of the city.

The neighborhood surrounding the high school is a middle to upper-middle class community with 60% European American, 18% Hispanic, 11% African American, and 11% Asian or Pacific Islanders (U.S. Census, 1990a). The majority of people (72%) residing in the community hold managerial, professional specialty, technical sales, or administrative support occupations (U.S. Census, 1990b).

Instrument

Discrimination Response Index (DRI). We used the free response portion of the DRI (see Wakefield & Hudley (1997) for complete description of entire instrument) which asks participants to describe situations of discrimination they commonly face in and out of school. The DRI also has five hypothetical scenarios that assess Feagin's (1991) initial four response types to acts of racial discrimination. Scenarios were based on responses from informal discussions with high school students. Scenarios described high school students who experienced racial discrimination while interviewing for a job, making a purchase at a department store, shopping at a mall, playing a basketball game, and entering a restaurant on prom night. Each scenario was accompanied by photographs

illustrating the actors. The free response portion of the instrument asked students to describe their own personal experiences with discrimination.

Procedure

Participants for whom informed consent was received from both parent and student were seen in small groups of 5-7, apart from their regular classrooms. Students were first told that they would read several stories and answer questions about disagreements that might happen in their everyday lives. During the free response portion of the instrument, students worked independently and described situations of discrimination that they had personally experienced.

Results

From the pool of 85 participants, 79 responded to the request to describe past experiences of racial discrimination (6 were blank). Our content analysis of the responses revealed that African American and Latino adolescents experienced racial discrimination at school and that they described similar types of discrimination. Analysis of the free response revealed a total of three common experiences describing discrimination at school. Below are the common experiences that emerged:

Treatment in classroom – Participants reported that they had been the target of discrimination by teachers in various ways. Many participants described teachers as hyper-vigilant towards their behavior as a result of the participants' racial or ethnic group membership. For example, a number of students reported that teachers were "always watching them" and "looking for out for me to something wrong."

Opportunities/Access to college – Participants reported that their opportunities to resources for college were influenced by their racial or ethnic group membership. A number of participants described situations in which school counselors and college counselors differentially shared resources based on students' ethnic or racial group membership. For example, one student reported, "I hardly ever hear anything about college when I talk to my guidance counselor" and "I asked for about college and I was talkin' about UCLA and the counselor told me about El Camino [a community college]."

Interactions with school police – Participants reported that school police typically question students based on racial or ethnic group membership. A number of students described situations in which school police "hassled them" in and around the school. For example, one student reported, "I got to school late after going to an academic decathlon event and when I was entering the school the school police stopped me and wrote me up for ditchin'." Another student wrote, "I was just waiting for the late-bus to after band practice, and the police that said I was loitering on school grounds."

Table 1

Frequency and Percentage of Themes of Discrimination

Theme	# of References to Theme	% of References to Theme
Access to College	36	45.69
Treatment in Classroom	22	27.85
School Police	21	26.58

Discussion

Our first hypothesis predicting that African American and Latino adolescents would report experiences of discrimination at their high school was supported. Seventy-nine of the of eighty-five participants described discrimination they had experienced at school.

Our second hypothesis predicting that Latino and African American students would have similar experiences of racial discrimination at school was also supported. African American and Latino students described three common types of situations: (a) discrimination in the classroom by teachers, (b) a lack of access to college resources, and (c) discrimination by school police officers.

Pervasiveness of Negative Cultural Stereotypes and Discrimination

Cultural stereotypes of African American and Latino adolescents are typically defamatory in nature (Krueger, 1996). African American youth are often stereotyped as having low intelligence, low motivation towards achievement and engaging in antisocial behavior. Similar to African American adolescents, Latino adolescents are often stereotyped as violent, antisocial and having low ambition (Cowan, Martinez and Mendiola, 1997). Our findings support the notion these negative stereotypes about Latino and African American students' are pervasive in schools and appear to influence school staff perceptions of African American and Latino high school students. The sheer pervasiveness of these negative stereotypes in our society may be one reason perceived

discrimination exists both in out-of-school contexts (Wakefield, Hudley, & Delgadillo, 1999) as well as within schools.

Awareness of Discrimination in our Society

In recent times, popular media have captured African American and Latino males being discriminated against (e.g., Rodney King's abuse by the Los Angeles Police Department) by members of the dominant culture (Dixon & Linz, 2000). In addition, there has been a recent resurgence of activism on behalf of civil rights (Washington Post, 2000). One rather speculative interpretation of these data is that African American and Latino adolescents may be more aware of current media images of police abuse, voting rights abuse, and other forms of discrimination by those in the dominant culture. This awareness may lead adolescents to a greater understanding of ethnic and racial relations in the country.

Limitations and Future Research

It must be noted that this project was highly exploratory in nature. Students' responses were limited to a relatively small amount of space (1/4 of a page) and thus we acknowledge that these data may oversimplify adolescents' experiences with discrimination. We must also acknowledge the use of self-report measures and hypothetical scenarios as possible limitations to our study. Self-report measures are limited since they reflect how people feel at a specific time-point and may not be generalizable to people's typical responses (Kirk, 1995). Given the significant ethical considerations for safeguarding the emotional well-being of participants, conducting research on ethnic and racial discrimination with young people requires a methodology

that offers as little psychological risk to participants as possible. Describing past experiences seems the most appropriate way to examine adolescents' responses to acts of racial discrimination. Future studies should employ an interview protocol in order to gain rich data and understand the complexities of young people's experiences with racial discrimination.

Implications

Even though communities and schools support multicultural approaches to education and culturally sensitive approaches to interacting with students, parents and communities, it is clear from these data that discrimination is a normative experience for many African American and Latino youth. As adolescents' environments become increasingly diverse, it will be necessary for young people to interact with people from a wide variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds in school, in their communities, and in workplaces of the future. Racial and ethnic discrimination is a thriving part of the American macroculture, and there is no assurance that such behaviors will abate any time soon. Thus, ethnic minority children will quite likely encounter acts of discrimination during their lives, and they must develop skills to successfully cope with such behavior and maintain optimal levels of mental health and self-esteem. Our findings speak to the experience of some Latino and African American male adolescents; however, we also speculate that these results may generalize to adolescents of other marginalized ethnic minority groups in urban settings (e.g., Southeast Asian and Central American). Future studies investigating ethnic minority adolescents' experiences with discrimination are warranted.

In sum, we know that current and future generations of children must be prepared to interact with people from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. In many regions of the country, young people are already living in neighborhoods and attending schools that are highly ethnically diverse (Educational Research Service, 1995). It is incumbent upon parents, school staff, and indeed every citizen, to assure that *all* children are equipped with the requisite skills to successfully and peacefully interact in our increasingly multicultural society.

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