

Racial Differences in Anger and Depression as Mediators in the Relationship Between Suspension and Juvenile Delinquency: A Test of General Strain Theory

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ABSTRACT

While scholars have studied racial bias in the application of out-of-school suspension and its influence on arrest and incarceration for decades, the mechanism that produces juvenile delinquency remains unclear. Guided by general strain theory, this study considers racial group differences in the evaluation of suspension as discriminatory, and how it might enhance the likelihood of negative emotions influencing delinquent behavior. Utilizing national longitudinal survey data, the author conducted generalized structural equation modeling to test the direct and indirect effects of suspension to anger, depression, and non-serious and serious delinquency among Black and White middle and high school students. This analysis—the first of its kind—revealed that suspended Black students were more likely to experience anger, depression, and general delinquency than White students. Unexpectedly, findings show that anger explained involvement in serious delinquency for suspended White students. The findings suggest a need for school administrators to adopt interventions and alternatives to suspension.

INTRODUCTION

Racial disparities in school discipline are a consequence of various economic, political, and social policies that have legalized unequal treatment of Black students in American schools (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2014). Negative controlling images of students of color, especially Black males, as “potentially dangerous” have led to an overreliance of zero tolerance policies to remove disruptive students from the school environment (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008, p. 856). Zero tolerance school policies are predetermined and nondiscretionary rule violations that require automatic suspension and/or expulsion (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). These policies provide the opportunity for teachers and administrators, regardless of their race or ethnicity, to apply excessive punishment for minor infractions such as improper dress attire, disruptive behavior, disrespect to staff, and insubordination that is widely viewed as biased and discriminatory (Garcia, 2016; Rudd, 2014). Fear and loss of control in the classroom by teachers, as opposed to an actual threat of dangerousness, increases the likelihood that Black students will experience excessive discipline (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Thus, the labeling of Black males as “dangerous” or “troublemakers” and Black girls as “unladylike,” is consequential for them when they do “act out” (Morris, 2005). As a result, Black students are suspended from school 3.5 times the rate of all other students (Office for Civil Rights, 2016; Losen et al., 2015).

Special attention should be paid to the manner in which zero tolerance policies negatively impact the mental health of adolescents. The APA Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008) reported that these policies may “create, enhance, or accelerate negative mental health outcomes for youth by increases in student alienation, anxiety, rejection, and breaking of healthy adult bonds” (p. 856). In 2003, the American Academy of Pediatrics ([AAP] 2003) cited racial bias in the application of school discipline as a major source of stress for Black students that can have profound adverse effects, such as negative emotional health. This is especially concerning given that suspension increases the likelihood of adolescents engaging in criminal activity, arrest, and incarceration (Balfanz, Spiridakis, Neild, & Lesters, 2003; Fabelo et al., 2011; Shollenberger, 2013; Wolf & Kupchick, 2016).

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

This study is guided by general strain theory (GST), which argues that an important link between harsh school discipline and delinquency is the experience of negative emotions (Agnew, 2001). The central aim of this study is to understand the direct and indirect effects of suspension, anger, and depression on non-serious and serious delinquency among a national sample of Black and White middle and high school students. This study also considers the controlling factors of prior non-serious and serious delinquency, gender, school attachment, college aspirations, peer substance use, social support, and self-esteem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature examining one’s emotional response to suspension indicates that many middle and high school students perceive suspension to be applied in a discriminatory manner. In a majority Black sample, Brown (2007) reported that students attending an alternative program were found guilty of and suspended for infractions without sufficient evidence, and believed the punishment was unreasonable. Kupchik (2009) found that staff at predominantly Black and Hispanic schools were constantly watching students for indicators of gang membership, acts of insubordination, disrespect of authority, or threatening behaviors. On the other hand, staff at a predominantly White school were concerned with fighting, drugs or alcohol, and a potential “Columbine-like threat” (p. 299). The author also observed a White male student become visibly angry in response to suspension. In the same way, Weissman (2015) found that a majority Black sample of students expressed feeling angry, upset, mad, frustrated, and disappointed about being suspended from school, particularly, because the punishment given was excessive relative to the circumstances of the rule violation. In some cases, respondents reported feeling that they had not even violated a rule.

There seems to be a consensus from the participants in these studies indicating that they want to attend school. Unfortunately, when they have been accused of breaking a rule, they were either not given a chance to tell their side of the story, or simply not trusted. Consequently, suspension from school left these students experiencing a host of negative emotions that have seemingly gone unchecked. Understanding the influence of suspension on negative emotions, such as anger and depression, will provide critical information for evaluating the impact of suspension on delinquency.

On the basis of the suspension-delinquency data currently available, there is too little research into how suspension influences juvenile delinquent outcomes to draw any firm conclusions about the manner in which suspension influences delinquency, arrest, or incarceration. Stated differently, studies have not analyzed any intervening or mediating variables that might represent the causal mechanism by which suspension achieves its effects. Mowen and Brent (2016) reported that the effect of suspension on juvenile arrests were so strong that race was no longer a significant predictor of arrest in a national sample of adolescents. Monahan, Rhew, Hawkins, and Brown (2014) reported that regardless of race/ethnicity and gender, suspension increases the likelihood of arrest. Fabelo et al. (2011) found that suspension increased the odds of juvenile arrests and detention for Texas middle and high school students. Balfanz et al. (2003) discovered that 80% of first-time incarcerated Black male ninth graders had been suspended in the eighth grade. Shollenberger (2013) found suspension is associated with arrests in adulthood for all males at a similar rate but varies for females. Finally, Wolf and Kupchik (2016) provided strong support for the claim that suspension significantly increased the odds of adult criminal offending, arrest, and incarceration in adulthood for suspended adolescents in general.

The existing research on the suspension-delinquency relationship corroborates the notion that youth who experience suspension are much more likely to experience arrest and incarceration than youth who do not experience suspension. However, the wide time frame from suspension to arrest or incarceration in adulthood creates a large gap in knowledge, thus making it difficult for researchers to provide any course of action for policy making. This study fills that gap by investigating delinquent activity within one year of suspension. This is an attempt to address the issue of possible intervening variables that might explain how suspension influences delinquent activity, which would make one vulnerable to arrest or incarceration.

This research seeks to answer the following question: Does suspension influence subsequent non-serious and serious delinquency through anger and depression, even after controlling for prior non-serious and serious delinquency, gender, school attachment, college aspirations, peer substance use, social support, and self-esteem? More specifically, drawing on GST and school discipline literature that centers on racial bias in the administration of suspensions as a source of strain, this research aims to test the racial group differences in negative emotional and delinquent outcomes of suspended middle and high school students.

Hypothesis 1: Anger will be a more important mediating factor in the relationship between suspension and non-serious delinquency for Black students than for White students.

Hypothesis 2: Depression will be a more important mediating factor in the relationship between suspension and non-serious delinquency among Black students than for White students.

Hypothesis 3: Anger will be a more important mediating factor in the relationship between suspension and serious delinquency for Black students than for White students.

Hypothesis 4: Depression will be a more important mediating factor in the relationship between suspension and serious delinquency among Black students than for White students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

General strain theory argues that strains or stressful events elevate the likelihood of negative emotions such as anger, frustration, and depression (Agnew, 1992, 2001). Some individuals may turn to crime as a way of reducing strain or negative emotions. Additionally, strain is most likely to lead to crime when it is: a) viewed as unjust, b) viewed as high in magnitude, c) is associated with low social control, and d) creates some pressure or incentive to participate in delinquent coping (Agnew, 1992, 2001). Central to this research is the argument that “discipline that is very strict, erratic, or excessive given the infraction” increases the likelihood of criminal involvement among youth (Agnew 2001, p. 344). Particularly, Black students, in comparison to White students (Ruck & Wortley, 2002; Brown, 2007; Weissman, 2015), are more likely to see suspension as harsh and excessive, a negative school experience, and racially discriminatory (Agnew, 2001).

METHODS

Data Collection

To test these hypotheses, I analyzed public-use data from waves 1 and 2 of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) (Harris, 2013). This is a nationally representative survey conducted by the University of North Carolina Population Center. The study derived from a cluster sample of 80 high schools (selected from a sampling frame of 26,666) and their feeder schools that were recruited from the community and stratified by region, urbanity, school type, ethnic mix, and size (Harris, 2013). During the 1994-1995 school year, students in seventh through twelfth grade were randomly chosen from the class rosters of the selected schools and were interviewed in their homes, along with their parents. The second wave of in-home interviews was collected in 1996 from adolescents and parents, excluding respondents who were in the twelfth grade at wave 1. The weighted sample size for this analysis is 3,289, including an oversample of Black adolescents with a parent who has a college degree. Because the Add Health research team used a cluster sample technique, I applied the appropriate cluster variable and longitudinal weight variable for combining waves 1 and 2. This enabled me to obtain unbiased estimates of population parameters and standard errors from the analysis. The next step involved grouping all respondents who reported that they were in the seventh through the eleventh grade in wave 1 into three race/ethnic subpopulations for middle and high school students. Twelfth graders were not included in this analysis because Add Health researchers did not re-interview twelfth graders during wave 2 (Harris, 2013). The final sample consists of 3,289 adolescents who were divided into two subpopulations: Black (n= 979) and White (n= 2,310).

Sample Characteristics

Over 60% of both Black and White subpopulations indicated that they are in high school (grades nine through eleven), and over 70% of each subpopulation indicated that they do not receive public assistance, such as welfare. Twenty percent of Black parents indicated their highest level of education as a high school diploma, while 14% graduated from college, and another 10% received professional training beyond college. White parents reported similar rates of higher education. A large share of parents reported that

they were married: Black (43.82%) and White (72.77%). Socioeconomic status variables are not included in the analysis because of a large number of missing values.

Description of Variables

Dependent Variables. Both non-serious and serious delinquency are index variables composed of 10 count items from wave 2, assessing how often the respondent reported participation in different forms of minor or non-serious and serious property and violent acts during the past twelve months.

Independent Variables. All independent variables were measured in wave 1. The main variable in the current study is suspension and was coded as 0 for not suspended and 1 for suspended. Anger and depression are both mediating variables. This study utilizes a proxy measure of anger derived from parent interviews and is coded as 0 for does not have bad temper and 1 for has bad temper. Depression is a thirteen-item, three-level categorical variable measuring low, medium, and high depression.

Control Variables. Several control variables that have been examined in prior research for their impact on juvenile delinquency were also used in the analyses: school attachment, college aspirations, deviant peer influence (Hirschi, 1969), peer substance use (Fergusson, Horwood, & Swain-Campbell, 2002; Monahan et al., 2013), social support (Agnew, 1992; Jang & Johnson, 2005; Kaufman, 2009), self-esteem (Peck, 2013), prior non-serious and serious delinquency, and gender.

RESULTS

Statistical Analyses

The primary interest of this study was to investigate potential pathways from suspension (X) to delinquency (Y) through anger (M) and depression (M). Generalized structural equation modeling (GSEM) was chosen as the appropriate statistical technique to use because it is a multivariate technique that uses a conceptual model, path diagram, and series of linked regression equations to capture complex relationships among observed and unobserved variables (Gunzler, Chen, Wu, & Zhang, 2013). GSEM is best suited for this study because it allows for binary and categorical mediators and count dependent variables.

A single-level mediation model is used for each hypothesis. To test hypotheses 1 and 3, a logit model was used to test the direct effect of suspension on anger because anger is a binary variable, and negative binomial models were used to test the direct effect of suspension and anger on non-serious delinquency because the dependent variables are count variables. When analyzing hypotheses 2 and 4, multinomial logit regression models were used instead of logit models because depression is a three-level categorical variable. In this case, two multinomial regression models were produced demonstrating the direct effect of medium depression (level 2) on non-serious delinquency, and the direct effect of high depression (level 3) on non-serious delinquency. Low (level 1) depression is the reference group.

Descriptive Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for all of the variables employed in this study. Of the entire group of 3,289 middle and high school students, 30% were Black and

70% were White. When examining engagement in delinquent behavior, White students reported slightly higher participation in non-serious delinquency (M=1.35, SD=1.88) than Black students (M=1.27, SD= 2.56). However, White students reported slightly lower participation in serious delinquency (M= 0.71, SD= 1.69) than Black students (M= 0.99, SD= 2.99). Consistent with national data on racial disparities in middle and high suspensions (Losen et al., 2015), 43.82% of Black adolescents (M= 0.42, SD= .65) in grades 7 through 11 reported being suspended, which is more than twice the rate of White students (M= 0.19, SD= 0.37) at 19.90%. Black students reported more anger (M= 0.32, SD= 0.60) than White students (M= 0.28, SD= 0.43). Likewise, Black students reported higher depression (M= 1.93, SD= 1.07) than White students (M= 1.77, SD= 0.75).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for All Variables

Variable (Cronbach's α)	Black (N=979)			White (N=2,310)		
	Range	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD
Non-serious Delinquency (.74)	0-14	1.27	2.56	0-15	1.35	1.88
Serious Delinquency (.73)	0-21	0.99	2.99	0-26	0.71	1.69
Suspension	0-1	0.42	0.65	0-1	0.19	0.37
Anger	0-1	0.32	0.6	0-1	0.28	0.43
Depression (.83)	1-3	1.93	1.07	1-3	1.77	0.75
School Attachment (.73)	1-3	1.56	0.87	1-3	1.83	0.7
College Aspirations (.81)	1-3	1.68	0.59	1-3	1.69	0.43
Self-esteem (.84)	1-3	2.00	1.19	1-3	1.79	0.85
Social Support (.83)	1-3	1.82	1.02	1-3	1.92	0.74
Peer Substance Use (.80)	0-3	1.79	0.97	0-3	1.92	0.76
Prior Non-serious Delinquency (.74)	0-16	1.79	0.97	0-18	1.92	0.76
Prior Serious Delinquency (.72)	0-22	1.51	3.5	0-26	0.98	2.06

GSEM Results

Four generalized structural equation models were used to examine the effects of anger and depression on the relationship between suspension and non-serious and serious delinquency, after controlling for prior non-serious and serious delinquency, gender, school attachment, college aspirations, peer substance use, social support, and self-esteem. Mediation analyses were performed separately for each subpopulation of adolescents (Black and White) to allow for detecting racial differences in this relationship. It is expected that these associations will be greater for Black students than for White students.

Non-serious Delinquency

The first hypothesis focuses on the role of anger in mediating the relationship between suspension and non-serious delinquency. In Table 2, the results indicate that the odds of engaging in non-serious delinquency increased by 35% for Black students who were suspended from school. White students who reported anger were 2.4 times more

likely to have been suspended. Similarly, Black and White students who reported anger 2.2 times and 2.4 times more likely to report suspension, respectively. Lastly, anger is associated with a 15% increase in non-serious delinquency among White students. Table 3 presents the results for the second hypothesis, which examined the role of depression in mediating the relationship between suspension and non-serious delinquency. Findings show that high depression increased by 89% for Black students who reported suspension.

Table 2. Impact of Suspension on Non-serious Delinquency through Anger

Variable	Black (N=619)			White (N=1,835)		
	β	SE	Exp(β)	β	SE	Exp(β)
Non-serious Delinquency x Suspension	0.3	0.14	1.35*	-0.08	0.09	0.91
Non-serious Delinquency x Anger	-0.06	0.14	0.93	0.13	0.07	1.15*
Anger x Suspension	0.79	0.24	2.22***	0.87	0.15	2.4***†
Non-serious Delinquency x Suspension x Anger	-0.05	0.11	0.94	0.12	0.06	1.13
Total Effect	-0.12	0.25	0.88	0.26	0.14	1.3

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

† indicates a significant difference when comparing Blacks and Whites ($p < .05$).

Table 3. Impact of Suspension on Non-serious Delinquency through Depression

Outcome Variable	Black (N=717)			White (N=1,960)		
	β	SE	Exp(β)	β	SE	Exp(β)
Non-serious Delinquency x Suspension	0.27	0.15	1.31	-0.08	0.08	0.91
Non-serious Delinquency x Medium Depression	0.19	0.17	1.2	0.14	0.08	1.15
Non-serious Delinquency x High Depression	0.21	0.18	1.23	0.09	0.09	1.1
Medium Depression x Suspension	-0.07	0.26	0.92	-0.16	0.18	0.84
High Depression x Suspension	0.64	0.28	1.89*	0.34	0.19	1.41
Non-serious Delinquency x Suspension x Medium Depression	-0.01	0.05	0.98	-0.24	0.03	0.97

	Black (N=717)			White (N=1,960)		
Non-serious Delinquency x Suspension x High Depression	0.13	0.14	1.14	0.03	0.03	1.03
Total Medium Effect	0.17	0.16	1.19	0.11	0.07	1.12
Total High Effect	0.34	0.32	1.41	0.13	0.13	1.1

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Serious Delinquency

The third hypothesis focused on the role of anger in mediating the relationship between suspension and serious delinquency. The results in Table 4 indicate that suspended Black students have a 61% greater odds of participating in serious delinquency, and suspended White students have a 39% greater odds of engaging in serious delinquency. When examining the direct effects of anger on suspension, White students who reported anger were 2.3 times more likely to have been suspended, whereas Black students were 2 times more likely to have been suspended. However, the odds of engaging in serious delinquency increased by 24% only for White students who reported anger. Importantly, there is a significant indirect effect of anger in the relationship between suspension and serious delinquency for White students.

Lastly, the impact of suspension on serious delinquency through depression is presented in Table 5. Findings show that high depression increased by 82% for Black students who reported suspension. Suspended White students have 48% higher odds of engaging in serious delinquency. In addition, high depression significantly increased the odds of engaging in serious delinquency among White students by 35%.

Table 4. Impact of Suspension on Serious Delinquency through Anger

Variable	Black (N= 619)			White (N=1,835)		
	β	SE	Exp(β)	β	SE	Exp(β)
Non-serious Delinquency x Suspension	0.48	0.20	1.61**	0.33	0.12	1.39**
Non-serious Delinquency x Anger	0.13	0.19	1.14	0.21	0.10	1.24*
Anger x Suspension	0.73	0.24	2.08**	0.85	0.15	2.34***†
Non-serious Delinquency x Suspension x Anger	0.09	0.14	1.10	0.18	0.09	1.20*
Total effect	0.22	0.33	1.25	0.40	0.20	1.49*

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

† indicates a significant difference when comparing Blacks and Whites ($p < .05$).

Table 5. Impact of Suspension on Serious Delinquency through Depression

Outcome Variable	Black (N=717)			White (N=1,960)		
	β	SE	Exp(β)	β	SE	Exp(β)
Non-serious Delinquency x Suspension	0.27	0.15	1.31	-0.08	0.08	0.91
Non-serious Delinquency x Medium Depression	0.19	0.17	1.2	0.14	0.08	1.15
Non-serious Delinquency x High Depression	0.21	0.18	1.23	0.09	0.09	1.1
Medium Depression x Suspension	-0.07	0.26	0.92	-0.16	0.18	0.84
High Depression x Suspension	0.64	0.28	1.89*	0.34	0.19	1.41
Non-serious Delinquency x Suspension x Medium Depression	-0.01	0.05	0.98	-0.24	0.03	0.97
Non-serious Delinquency x Suspension x High Depression	0.13	0.14	1.14	0.03	0.03	1.03
Total Medium Effect	0.17	0.16	1.19	0.11	0.07	1.12
Total High Effect	0.34	0.32	1.41	0.13	0.13	1.1

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to examine racial group differences in negative emotional and delinquent outcomes of suspended middle and high school students. Consistent with the GST framework (Agnew, 1992, 2001), this study found anger to be an important mediating factor in the relationship between suspension and serious delinquency among White students. This is an unexpected finding since White students are less likely to believe that students from their racial group will face discriminatory treatment compared to students from other racial groups (Ruck & Wortley, 2002). This finding suggests that their anger may be related to white privilege because racial status is related to student punitiveness (Welch & Payne, 2010), with White students being less likely to be subjected to severe school control than Black students (Nichols, 2004; Rocque, 2010).

There were critical racial group differences found among suspended Black and White students. Namely, suspension was associated with anger and high depression among Black students, but it did not influence their involvement in delinquency. At the same time, suspension was related to non-serious and serious delinquency among Black students, but it was not mediated by anger or depression. This is an unexpected finding since it has been documented that suspended Black students have reported feeling a variety of negative

emotions, including anger and depression (Kupchik, 2009; Weissman, 2015), and have also reported experiencing first-time arrests and incarceration as a juvenile and an adult after suspension (Balfanz et al., 2003; Fabelo et al., 2011; Monahan et al., 2013; Mowan & Brent, 2016; Shollenberger, 2013; Wolf & Kupchik, 2016). Although suspension is a highly stressful event for most Black students because of the racial bias (AAP, 2003) and lack of procedural justice (Weissman, 2015) that they often experience, delinquency may not be a coping mechanism for relieving that source of stress.

Perhaps, suspended Black students are subsequently arrested and incarcerated due to spillover effects of suspension. For instance, Black students who have been suspended from school have reported high rates of dropping out of school, school disengagement, low grades, as well simultaneous arrests at school because of the criminalization of school misconduct and the incorporation of law enforcement, also known as school resource officers (Heitzeg, 2009; Rudd, 2014).

The overuse of suspension sends the message that the emotional and behavioral well-being of youth is a necessary evil if zero tolerance policies are to be efficient in deterring others from violating the rules (Skiba, 2000), even if they are not applied fairly. These policies are akin to other racialized and fear-driven policies, such as mandatory minimum sentences that have contributed to incarcerating Black youth and adults in mass proportion (Heitzeg, 2009). Therefore, efforts must be made to dismantle zero tolerance policies and eliminate suspension for subjectively assessed conduct. The findings in this study provide important insight into the need for school administrators to adopt school interventions and alternatives to suspension such as restorative justice programs that focus on mediation, conflict resolution and agreement, rather than punishment. Such programs promote school climates that create an institutional environment that positively influences student learning and well-being (Owen et al., 2015).

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

One limitation of this study is that it assumes that suspension is a stressful event, and is therefore disliked by members in each group. Subsequent research should examine the reason for suspension, number of times suspended, and the student's evaluation of the suspension. Researchers might also consider school, neighborhood, individual, and familial factors that might serve as both mediators and moderators in the suspension-delinquency relationship. For instance, mediating factors will help explain the relationship between suspension and delinquency, while moderating variables affect the strength of the relationship between suspension and delinquency (Hayes, 2013). Understanding the influence of mediating and moderating variables may provide critical information for evaluating, designing, and promoting alternatives to suspension.

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