



Variations in students' perceived reasons for, sources of, and forms of in-school discrimination: A latent class analysis

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 April 2015

Received in revised form 7 January 2016

Accepted 9 May 2016

Available online 26 May 2016

Keywords:

Discrimination

Adolescents

School climate

Engagement

Intersectionality

Latent class

ABSTRACT

Although there exists a healthy body of literature related to discrimination in schools, this research has primarily focused on racial or ethnic discrimination as perceived and experienced by students of color. Few studies examine students' perceptions of discrimination from a variety of sources, such as adults and peers, their descriptions of the discrimination, or the frequency of discrimination in the learning environment. Middle and high school students in a Midwestern school district ($N = 1468$) completed surveys identifying whether they experienced discrimination from seven sources (e.g., peers, teachers, administrators), for seven reasons (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, religion), and in eight forms (e.g., punished more frequently, called names, excluded from social groups). The sample was 52% White, 15% Black/African American, 14% Multiracial, and 17% Other. Latent class analysis was used to cluster individuals based on reported sources of, reasons for, and forms of discrimination. Four clusters were found, and ANOVAs were used to test for differences between clusters on perceptions of school climate, relationships with teachers, perceptions that the school was a "good school," and engagement. The Low Discrimination cluster experienced the best outcomes, whereas an intersectional cluster experienced the most discrimination and the worst outcomes. The results confirm existing research on the negative effects of discrimination. Additionally, the paper adds to the literature by highlighting the importance of an intersectional approach to examining students' perceptions of in-school discrimination.

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1. Introduction

Perceptions of discrimination based on identities such as race, gender, or sexual orientation can have negative consequences for youth (Bontempo & D'augelli, 2002; Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Leaper & Brown, 2008; Russell et al., 2012). When discrimination occurs from those at school, the consequences are not only for mental health but also for school engagement and academic achievement (Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). Discrimination refers to negative or unfair treatment based on a social identity such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation (Brown & Bigler, 2005). The majority of existing research in this area has focused on racial-ethnic discrimination (Schmitt et al., 2014);

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ACTION EDITOR: Stephen Kilgus.

however, youth from many stigmatized groups experience discrimination and may experience discrimination based on multiple social identities. Stigmatized groups include those with less power and privilege in society based on a social identity, such as racial-ethnic minorities, women, and gay men and lesbians. Yet little is known about how individuals experience the co-occurrence of discrimination (Garnett et al., 2014). Furthermore, some studies have examined the source (i.e., adults or peers) of discrimination (e.g., Benner & Graham, 2013; Fisher et al., 2000; Greene, Way & Pahl, 2006; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004), but more work is needed on how discrimination from different sources is differentially associated with outcomes (Niwa, Way & Hughes, 2014; Williams, Neighbors & Jackson, 2003). Similarly, work is needed that explores the different forms discrimination takes, for example name-calling versus being punished unfairly (Niwa et al., 2014). Finally, school success indicators such as engagement are understudied relative to mental health outcomes. The goal of the current study was to use a person-centered approach to explore the associations of varying sources, forms, and reasons for discrimination with academic engagement and perceptions of school climate in an adolescent sample.

1.1. An intersectional perspective on discrimination

The majority of research examining adolescents' experiences with discrimination focuses on racial discrimination (Garnett et al., 2014). For example, a recent review found that 65% of studies examining the relationship between discrimination and mental health examined race-ethnicity, but only 17% considered gender discrimination and 6% considered discrimination based on sexual orientation (Schmitt et al., 2014). Nonetheless, all three types have negative effects for youths' psychological, health, and academic outcomes (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Leaper & Brown, 2008; Saewyc, 2011; Schmitt et al., 2014). Yet few studies examine adolescents' perceptions of discrimination based on other social identities markers (e.g., socioeconomic status, [dis]ability, religion) or consider multiple identities at the same time (Grollman, 2012).

Because 60% of youth in the U.S. report experiencing perceived discrimination based on two or more identities during adolescence (Grollman, 2012), it is important to take into account potentially additive or multiplicative effects. The current paper uses intersectionality theory to understand youths' experiences with multiple perceived reasons for discrimination. Intersectionality theory is an analytic framework that "consider[s] the meaning and consequences of multiple categories of social group membership" (Cole, 2009, p.170). This theory seeks to examine how various biological, social and cultural categories of identity interact on multiple and simultaneous levels, contributing to injustice and inequality. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), the theory was initially used by scholars to examine how race and gender simultaneously interacted to affect the lived experiences of Black females (see also Collins, 2000). This theoretical approach recognizes the ways in which, for example, the schooling and life experiences of Black boys may differ from Black girls, even though they share the same racial identification. An intersectional approach to the study of discrimination assumes that different types of discrimination may be related to the extent that they are based on the intersection of multiple identities (Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers & Jackson, 2010). Because youth may be uncertain about the basis for any particular act (Garnett et al., 2014; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004), studies focused on just one identity may underestimate the role of perceived discrimination for youth who identify with multiple stigmatized groups. Furthermore, youth generally experience their multiple identities as a coherent whole (Warner & Shields, 2013), so it may be difficult for them to report on an experience as if it is related to just one portion of their identity. It is unknown whether youth experience discrimination based on certain identities (i.e., race) more frequently or as more distressing than discrimination based on another identity (i.e., gender). The double-jeopardy hypothesis suggests that individuals belonging to multiple stigmatized groups experience additive or multiplicative effects of discrimination because of their identities (Beal, 2008; Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Hayes, Chun-Kennedy, Edens & Locke, 2011). However, evidence for this is mixed (Grollman, 2012).

Recent work has applied intersectional frameworks to the study of identity-based discrimination (Daley, Solomon, Newman & Mishna, 2008; Garnett et al., 2014; Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni & Koenig, 2011; Seaton et al., 2010). For example, studies of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth find that about 80% experience verbal abuse and hear homophobic remarks at school; these and other forms of victimization are associated with poor mental health and academic outcomes (D'Augelli, 2002; Diaz & Kosciw, 2009). At the same time, LGB youth also experience victimization based on other identities: more than half of LGB youth of color are verbally or physically harassed because of their race, about one-third experience discrimination based on their religion, and about 17% report discrimination based on their ability status (Diaz & Kosciw, 2009). Furthermore, those youth who reported discrimination because of both sexual orientation and race were more likely to miss school than those harassed because of sexual orientation or race alone, and more than three times as likely to miss school than those who did not experience discrimination (Diaz & Kosciw, 2009). Similarly, in a nationally representative sample of adolescents and young adults, Grollman (2012) found that those who were discriminated against based on more identities (i.e., race, gender, sexual orientation, or social class) had higher depressive symptoms and worse health than those who reported only one reason for discrimination. Research on adults has also found that reporting multiple reasons for major discrimination predicts worse mental health (Gayman & Barragan, 2013; Kessler, Mickelson & Williams, 1999). Some studies report no additive or multiplicative effects. For example, Cogburn, Chavous, and Griffin (2011) found that African American adolescents who experienced high levels of both racial and gender discrimination were not worse off than those experiencing high levels of either. Importantly, studies have not considered how experiencing multiple reasons for discrimination is associated with academic engagement and perceptions of overall school climate in addition to mental health. The current study advances this research by allowing youth to identify multiple identities as reasons for discrimination and considers the relationship to academic engagement and school climate. A second advance of the current study is that it also examines multiple sources and forms of discrimination.

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