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# The specter of discrimination: Fear of interpersonal racial discrimination among adolescents in Chicago



Daniel Herda

Merrimack College, Sociology, S6, 315 Turnpike Street, North Andover, MA, 01845, USA

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## ABSTRACT

This analysis examines fear of interpersonal racial discrimination among Black, Hispanic, and White adolescents. The extent and correlates of these concerns are examined using survey data from the Project for Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods. Borrowing from the fear-of-crime literature, the contact hypothesis, and group threat theory, several hypotheses are developed linking discrimination fear to direct personal experience with discrimination, indirect or vicarious experience, and environmental signals of discrimination. Results show that about half of Blacks and Hispanics have feared discrimination in the past year. Multivariate results indicate that fear is most likely if one has experienced victimization first-hand and when one's parent is affected by discrimination. Further, a larger presence neighborhood outgroups produces greater fear. Overall, discrimination fear constitutes an additional obstacle for minority adolescents as they transition to adulthood. The phenomenon warrants increased scholarly attention and represents a fruitful avenue for future research.

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## 1. Introduction

Race continues to shape the everyday experiences of many minorities in the U.S. (Feagin, 1991; Feagin and Sykes, 1994; Kessler et al., 1999; Seaton et al., 2008). Particularly among Black Americans, instances of interpersonal racial discrimination are widely reported and linked to heightened stress and anxiety (Pascoe and Richman, 2009; Mays et al., 2007; Landrine and Klonoff, 1996; Williams and Williams-Morris, 2000; Clark et al., 1999). Even President Obama shared personal discrimination experiences in the wake of George Zimmerman's acquittal for the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2013 (Lewis, 2013). But with its commonplace nature and long list of consequences, how much do individuals worry about discrimination as they navigate their social worlds? Are people emotionally burdened by the possibility of falling victim to differential or unfair treatment based on their race? Currently we know little about the extent of such concerns or the conditions that make them more likely. The present study offers a foundation for a new line of inquiry focused on the fear of interpersonal racial discrimination.

To understand discrimination concerns, I follow decades of research on the fear of crime (Hale, 1996; Rader, 2004; Conklin, 1971; Ross, 1994; Dolan and Peasgood, 2007; Pickett et al., 2012; Drakulich, 2012). There is a clear parallel as both crime and discrimination represent forms of victimization perpetrated by others, which may engender fear. However, only the former has received significant scholarly attention. The expansive fear-of-crime literature highlights how such concerns can alter behavior and choices, and interfere with the normal functioning of society. Consequently, fear is a social problem beyond

E-mail address: [herdad@merrimack.edu](mailto:herdad@merrimack.edu).

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actual instances of crime. Whether discrimination fear produces similar consequences is an important question, but we must first identify the extent and causes of such concerns. Using fear-of-crime hypotheses and expectations from the contact and group threat theories, the current study provides the first detailed analysis of discrimination fear among adolescents.

The racial experiences of young people are of particular importance. During this vulnerable stage in the life course adolescents are solidifying their identities and worldviews (Harris-Britt et al., 2007; Caldwell et al., 2004). Discrimination fears during the transition to adulthood may influence attitudes regarding neighborhoods, employment, education, romantic partners, friends, and entry into outgroup dominated contexts (Krysan and Farley, 2002). Further, with their heightened and rapidly expanding racial diversity, it is crucial to understand how young people experience race today (Frey, 2011).

I examine discrimination fear with data from the Project for Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN). The survey includes self-reports of discrimination fear and experience among adolescents and their primary caregivers, allowing for intergenerational comparisons. I consider four research questions: 1) *what is the extent of racial discrimination fear among adolescents?*; 2) *does fear vary across racial groups?*; 3) *do levels differ between adolescents and their parents?*; and 4) *what factors make fear more likely?*

## 2. Background and literature review

### 2.1. Interpersonal discrimination experiences

Reports of discrimination experience are widespread among both minority adults and adolescents (Dotterer et al., 2009; DuBois et al., 2002; Harris, 2004; Kessler et al., 1999; Sellers and Shelton, 2003; Swim et al., 2003; Stainback and Irvin, 2012). Generally, Black Americans report the highest levels. For example, in a national sample of 1170 Black American youth, Seaton et al. (2008) found that nearly 90 percent reported at least one of 13 “everyday” discrimination measures. About two-thirds reported others acting as if they were better than the respondent and majorities reported being treated with less respect and less courtesy. Substantial proportions of Hispanic adolescents report discrimination as well (Bobo and Suh, 1995; Harris, 2004; Rumbaut, 1994; Telles and Ortiz, 2008; Lopez et al., 2010). Using data from an ethnically diverse high school, Fisher et al. (2000) found that 65 percent reported being hassled by store clerks, 47 percent were called racially insulting names and 35 percent were discouraged from joining advanced classes. Across national origin, Kasinitz et al.'s (2008) found that in New York City, 42, 38 and 41 percent of Puerto Rican, Dominican and South American origin respondents respectively reported discrimination while shopping in the past year.

Interestingly, some Whites report discrimination experiences as well.<sup>1</sup> Research generally estimates the proportion to be as high as 30 percent (Kessler et al., 1999), but often as low as one-tenth (Harris, 2004; Mayrl and Saperstein, 2013). The relative scarcity of their discrimination reports follows the idea that race is less central to White identities and experiences (McIntosh, 1988).

For minority victims, interpersonal discrimination produces several mental, physical and behavioral consequences (Mays et al., 2007; Pascoe and Richman, 2009; Williams et al., 2003; Williams and Williams-Morris, 2000). Reported experiences are associated with increased anxiety and depression (Kessler et al., 1999; Williams et al., 1997), decreased self-esteem (Seaton et al., 2008), poor perceived physical health (Larson et al., 2007), increased hypertension (Din-Dzietham et al., 2004; Krieger and Sidney, 1996), indicators of coronary heart disease (Cardarelli et al., 2010), lower utilization of health care (Burgess et al., 2008), accelerated biological aging (Chae et al., 2014), negative racial attitudes (Tropp, 2003), increased cigarette smoking and drug use (Gibbons et al., 2004; Landrine and Klonoff, 1996), and delinquency (Burt et al., 2012; Simons et al., 2006). The consequences are so numerous that Smith et al. (2007) used the phrase “racial battle fatigue” to describe the experiences of many minorities coping with the burden of discrimination.

Given its extent, most minority adolescents will either know the stress of discrimination first-hand or vicariously through the experiences of significant others. Given its consequences, most will prefer to avoid such encounters. Taken together, I expect that discrimination fear will exist at significant levels. Further, given that racial discrimination is more of a reality for minorities, I expect that Blacks and Hispanics will report significantly more fear than Whites.

### 2.2. Discrimination fear

Despite extensive research on discrimination experiences, we know little about whether individuals worry about such encounters. Krysan and Farley (2002) and Krysan (2002) provide initial evidence suggesting that discrimination fear is not only common, but consequential. In the former, the authors examined Blacks' residential preferences to understand persistent Black–White segregation in the U.S. Using data from the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality (MCSUI), the authors focused on Blacks' willingness to move into hypothetical White neighborhoods. Only 35 percent would “pioneer” such neighborhoods compared to nearly 100 percent who would move into racially mixed or majority Black neighborhoods. Interestingly, this reticence was rarely based on preference for co-racial proximity. Rather, most cited concerns about White hostility and the risk of personal victimization, such as waking up with “crosses burning on my lawn” (Krysan and Farley,

<sup>1</sup> In acknowledging that Whites report interpersonal racial discrimination, I am not suggesting that they are affected by structural forms of racism.

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