



Perceived discrimination, parenting, and academic adjustment among racial/ethnic minority adolescents



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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the extent to which perceived racial/ethnic discrimination at school was directly and indirectly (via parenting practices) related to academic adjustment among racial and ethnic minority adolescents. Participants (58% female) were 208 minority students (63% African American, 19% Latino, 18% Multiracial) in grades 6–8 from an urban middle school in the Midwestern United States. In the fall (Time 1) and subsequent spring (Time 2) of the school year, youth completed in-school surveys with items on discrimination experiences, parental monitoring, and academic outcomes (intrinsic motivation, school self-esteem, commitment to learning, school bonding). Results from mediation analyses revealed that experiences with discrimination were in part related to academic outcomes through their effect on parental monitoring, and showed that exposure to discrimination predicted lower levels of parental monitoring, which in turn predicted lower levels of academic motivation and school engagement.

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Achievement gaps indicate that racial and ethnic minority youth lag behind their non-minority counterparts in academic achievement, high school graduation, and college attendance (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). In addition to quantitative measures of achievement and educational attainment, there is a growing interest in academic adjustment measures including academic motivation (Pintrich, 2003) and school engagement (Skinner, Kindermann, Connell, & Wellborn, 2009), particularly as they relate to the school experiences of racial and ethnic minority students (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012), because motivation and engagement are potentially malleable (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004) and are viable pathways to mitigate low levels of academic achievement (Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2004). One of the issues that set minority youths' school experiences apart from those of other students is discrimination. Racial and ethnic minority youth commonly report experiencing discrimination (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004) and many African American and Latino youth experience discrimination in the school setting (Benner & Graham, 2011; Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2009a; Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004). Youth who experience discrimination have lower grade point averages and report lower levels of self-esteem and school bonding (Dotterer et al., 2009a; Huynh & Fuligni, 2010). Further, a growing body of research has begun to examine links between perceived discrimination and family relationships and indicates that chronic stressors such as racial discrimination are not only linked to individual well-being but also to family

relationship qualities and parenting practices (e.g., Murry, Brody, Simons, Cutrona, & Gibbons, 2008a; Murry et al., 2008b; Riina & McHale, 2012).

Guided by García Coll et al. (1996) integrative model of child development in minority families, the present study examined the extent to which perceived discrimination at school was directly and indirectly (via parenting practices) related to academic adjustment among racial and ethnic minority adolescents.

Discrimination during adolescence and academic adjustment

Previous research highlights the importance and pervasiveness of racial/ethnic discrimination for minority youth in the United States (Brown & Bigler, 2005), thus discrimination is a salient factor in the development of ethnic minority youth (García Coll et al., 1996). For example, Fisher, Wallace, and Fenton (2000) found that approximately half of the African American and Latino participants in their sample reported experiencing institutional discrimination, such as being harassed in stores, and 40% of these adolescents reported discrimination in the school context. Similarly, Huynh and Fuligni (2010) found that 60% of Latino adolescents in their sample reported experiencing discrimination from adults and peers.

Racial discrimination has been identified as a potential risk factor for minority adolescents (Fischer & Shaw, 1999; Umana-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007), as experiences of discrimination have been linked to adjustment and well-being in African American (Fischer & Shaw, 1999; Simmons et al., 2002) and Latino youth (Szalacha et al., 2003; Umana-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). A growing body of work connects discrimination to academic engagement, achievement motivation and

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performance (Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor, Gonzales-Backen, Bámaca, & Zeiders, 2009; Dotterer et al., 2009a). For example, Smalls, White, Chavous, and Sellers (2007) found that discrimination experienced by African American adolescents was associated with lower academic achievement and motivation. Wong, Eccles, and Sameroff (2003) also found that perceived discrimination at school was negatively related to African American adolescents' academic motivation (e.g., importance of school, utility value of school, beliefs about their own academic competence) but was not significantly related to academic achievement as measured by school grades. In a study of Latino adolescents' experiences of discrimination, Benner and Graham (2011) reported that more discrimination, as well as increases in discrimination from 9th to 10th grade, was associated with poorer perceptions of school climate, which in turn was related to students' GPAs and absences. However, discrimination was not directly related to Latino youths' academic achievement. These findings underscore the importance of examining the relation between experiences with discrimination and dimensions of academic adjustment beyond academic achievement, such as school bonding or school self-esteem. Moreover, this body of literature highlights the importance of investigating mechanisms that may help clarify how adolescents' experiences with discrimination are linked to their academic adjustment.

Parenting practices in racial/ethnic minority families

Guided by García Coll et al.'s (1996) integrative model of child development, we sought to explore parenting practices that may elucidate the mechanism connecting discrimination and academic outcomes for minority adolescents. García Coll et al. (1996) integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children describes the process by which macrosocial factors are related to parenting and developmental processes in children. Notably, the authors' state that "processes such as racism, discrimination, and prejudice directly affect children's experience through social interactions in specific inhibiting and promoting environments" (García Coll et al., 1996, p. 1896), such as the family environment and its day-to-day parenting practices. Given the centrality of family in the socialization of minority youth, as evidenced by the predominant value of *familism* among Latino families (Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006) and a high frequency of sharing personal and emotional information with parents among both African American and Latino youth (Bean & Rolleri, 2005), it is likely that youth's views of their relationships with their parents play an important role in discrimination-academic adjustment associations. In the present study, we focus on parental monitoring because it reflects a parenting practice that has been linked positively to minority youths' academic outcomes (Henry, Plunkett, & Sands, 2011; Lowe & Dotterer, 2013).

Parental monitoring is typically defined as parent's knowledge of their adolescent's activities and whereabouts (Stattin & Kerr, 2000). Parental monitoring contributes to minority youth wellbeing, as it has been consistently negatively associated with risk behaviors, such as delinquency and drug/alcohol use, and positively associated with psychosocial competencies (e.g., self-esteem) among Latino and African American adolescents (Bean, Barber, & Crane, 2006; Carlson, Uppal, & Prosser, 2000; Forehand, Miller, Dutra, & Chance, 1997; Okagaki & Frensch, 1998; Shakib et al., 2003). For example, work by Brody & Flor (1998) has documented in African American families that a "no non-sense" style of parenting, which includes parental monitoring of children's activities, is consistently related to positive emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes among children and adolescents. A review of literature on parental control in Latino families by Halgunseth et al. (2006) similarly noted parental monitoring, parental protection, and involved parent-child relationships supported the best psychological and academic outcomes for Latino youth.

These positive outcomes emphasize the integral position of parental monitoring within the context of minority parenting, which is typically characterized by higher levels of this parenting practice (Fulgini &

Fulgini, 2007; Okagaki & Frensch, 1998). To explore parental monitoring as a possible mediator of the discrimination-academic adjustment link we drew on previous research regarding how parenting practices are shaped by environmental circumstances such as racial discrimination (García Coll et al., 1996; Kotchick & Forehand, 2002). The link between racial discrimination and parenting practices may be explained by emotional spillover (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989) in which stressors trigger emotional responses, which then extend beyond the individual to pervade aspects of interpersonal relationships and family functioning (Nelson, O'Brien, Blankson, Calkins, & Keane, 2009). Evidence for this process shows that adults' maladaptive responses to extra-familial stressors interfere with family relationships (Murry et al., 2008b) and parenting (Cummings & Davies, 2002). Further, adolescents' experiences of racial discrimination have been linked to poorer relationship quality with mothers and fathers (Riina & McHale, 2012) and less effective parenting practices (Murry et al., 2008a). For instance, in two separate datasets (Rural Georgia Single Parent Family Study and Family and Community Health Study) Murry and colleagues found that adolescents' experiences of racial discrimination were associated with less parental monitoring (Murry et al., 2008a). In line with emotional spillover, to the extent that stressors such as discrimination trigger negative emotions, youth may develop more negative views about their close relationships with others and perceive that their parents are less involved or supportive. For example, work by Simmons et al. (2002) found that adolescents who experienced high levels of discrimination tended to hold a cynical and hostile view of others.

Hypotheses

The current study investigated associations between perceived discrimination at school and academic motivation and school engagement among a sample of multi-ethnic early adolescents. This study also examined whether parental monitoring mediated the links between discrimination and academic adjustment outcomes (intrinsic motivation, school self-esteem, commitment to learning, school bonding). Based on previous literature, we hypothesized that more exposure to racial/ethnic discrimination from teachers and peers at school would be associated with less academic motivation and school engagement. Building on research connecting parenting practices and children's experiences with discrimination and extending past research findings that suggest experiences with race discrimination take a toll on the parent-adolescent relationship (Murry et al., 2008ab; Riina & McHale, 2012), we hypothesized that adolescents might perceive less effective parenting practices in the face of discrimination, which in turn would be associated with less academic motivation and school engagement. We focused on adolescent perceptions of parenting practices because past research has shown that parents and children have moderate to low agreement when reporting on parent behaviors (Tein, Roosa, & Michaels, 1994), that children's perceptions of their parents' behavior is as important an influence on their development as their parents' actual behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992), and that adolescents' perceptions of parenting qualities such as monitoring provide a proximal environment that explains variation in academic outcomes (Henry, Merten, Plunkett, & Sands, 2008).

Methods

Participants

Participants were middle school students ($N = 208$) in the 6th (39%), 7th (37%), or 8th (24%) grades. Most youth identified as African American (63%), 19% identified as Latino, and 18% identified as multiracial. Just over half the students were female (58%). Parents' average level of education indicated some college ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.12$) and the distribution showed that 10% of parents did not have a high school degree, 22% had a high school degree or GED, 31% had completed some

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