



# Adding to the Education Debt: Depressive Symptoms Mediate the Association between Racial Discrimination and Academic Performance in African Americans

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## ABSTRACT

Although the United States faces a seemingly intractable divide between white and African American academic performance, there remains a dearth of longitudinal research investigating factors that work to maintain this gap. The present study examined whether racial discrimination predicted the academic performance of African American students through its effect on depressive symptoms. Participants were a community sample of African American adolescents ( $N = 495$ ) attending urban public schools from grade 7 to grade 9 ( $M_{\text{age}} = 12.5$ ). Structural equation modeling revealed that experienced racial discrimination predicted increases in depressive symptoms 1 year later, which, in turn, predicted decreases in academic performance the following year. These results suggest that racial discrimination continues to play a critical role in the academic performance of African American students and, as such, contributes to the maintenance of the race-based academic achievement gap in the United States.

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## 1. Introduction

A considerable body of literature evinces that racial discrimination is prevalent, pernicious, and persistent in the lives of African American adolescents (English, Lambert, & Ialongo, 2014; Pachter & García Coll, 2009; Williams & Mohammed, 2009). The stressor has recently been linked to the long-standing race-based academic achievement gap between African American and white adolescents (e.g., English, 2002), which, itself, contributes to disparities in health outcomes, income, and incarceration for African American adults (e.g. Adler & Rehkopf, 2008; Wald & Losen, 2003). In fact, contemporary and historical discrimination based on race have been identified as contributors to what is referred to as the mounting education debt, the culmination of historical, economic, socio-political, and moral factors that promote unequal academic achievement for children of color, particularly African American youth (Ladson-Billings, 2006). While recent cross-sectional research suggests that academic achievement disparities for African American children have been maintained and exacerbated, in part, by experienced racial discrimination and its impact on depressive symptoms (e.g., Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003), there is a dearth of longitudinal research investigating depressive symptoms as mechanisms through which racial discrimination affects academic performance for African American youth. To address this gap in the literature, the present study investigated depressive symptoms as mediators of a

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prospective association between racial discrimination experiences and academic performance among a sample of African American youth.

### 1.1. Models of Racial Discrimination Effects

In this study, racial discrimination is defined as the behavioral manifestation of underlying prejudiced beliefs about African Americans, a component of broader societal racism that operates systematically to distribute power and maintain a social caste system based on racial group membership (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Harrell, 2000; Jones, 1997). Racial discrimination often occurs for African Americans as subtle, insidious, interpersonal slights, referred to as racial microaggressions (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). These personal or vicarious experiences can include being assumed incompetent or unintelligent (e.g., a teacher acting surprised at a positive academic performance), being assumed a criminal (e.g., being watched or followed in a public place), or being treated as a second-class citizen (e.g., being ignored or overlooked at a restaurant) in settings such as school or within the community (Harrell, 2000; Sue et al., 2007).

Several theoretical models place racial discrimination as a critical stressor leading to negative outcomes for African Americans. For instance, the phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST; Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997) posits that African American children and adolescents are exposed to a unique social environment, characterized in part by specific stressors, that affects their psychological and social functioning. PVEST includes experienced racial discrimination as a risk factor to positive social and psychological health for African American adolescents. In particular, PVEST stresses that individual characteristics, such as race, sex, and socioeconomic status, affect the degree to which experienced racial discrimination affects adolescents' developmental outcomes. Similarly, the model presented by García Coll et al. (1996) theorizes that racism and discrimination influence school and neighborhood contexts, child characteristics, and the familial environment, all of which affect the cognitive, social, and emotional developmental outcomes of children and adolescents of color. In addition, in their biopsychosocial model of the experience of racism, Clark et al. (1999) posit constitutional, sociodemographic, psychological, and behavioral factors as moderators of the experience of racism stress. The model stipulates that these factors affect the appraisal of racism and, as such, affect an individual's psychological and physiological stress response and the consequent health outcomes for an individual. The present study, grounded in these theoretical models positing racial discrimination as stressful and developmentally significant for African American youth, investigated racial discrimination as a predictor of psychological symptomatology and negative academic outcomes for African American youth.

### 1.2. The Education Debt

In her seminal 2006 publication, Gloria Ladson-Billings identified that the term “achievement gap” places the focus of discourse about inequality on individual academic performance isolated in time without considering the various structural inequalities that have worked to maintain disparities and, thus, contribute to what she refers to as an accumulating education debt. As such, she argued that “achievement gap” is not sufficient to describe the disparity in academic performance between African American and white students that has been stark and intractable (English, 2002) throughout the history of integrated schools in the United States (Diamond, 2006; Howard, 2010). Indeed, the race-based disparity in academic achievement has been consistent across time, and in particular over the past two decades, across all age groups and assessments (e.g., Barton & Coley, 2010). These gaps have persisted to today as African American students consistently underachieve in all indicators of academic proficiency. For example, white students averaged 26 points higher than African American students on each subject of the 500-point 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress scales (NAEP; Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson, & Rahman, 2009). The 2009 NAEP also indicates there was little to no change in testing performance or GPA gaps through the mid-2000s (e.g., Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009). In fact, in some cases the gap has increased, as in the period from 1990 to 2009 in which the increase in graduates completing a standard high school curriculum was greater for white and Asian/Pacific Islander students than African American students (Nord et al., 2011). These gaps in academic performance have been present throughout the history of public schooling despite there being no evidence for cognitive or biological differences between races that account for differential academic achievement (Jencks & Phillips, 2011). Indeed, in line with the conceptualization of education debt, there is a wealth of evidence indicating that differences in academic achievement across race have clear origins in unique social factors linked to the race of students, such as hypersegregated schools (Wilkes & Iceland, 2004) that bring with them minimal funding for African American students and inadequate schooling conditions (e.g., Baker, Sciarra, & Farrie, 2010). In addition, African Americans are differentially exposed to racial stress and discrimination within schools (Steele & Aronson, 1995), including assessment tools that discriminate based on the test-taker's race (e.g., SAT; Jencks & Phillips, 2011). Gaining a clear understanding of how social factors such as racial discrimination affect the developmental outcomes of African Americans is essential in mitigating the chronic and persistent racial academic achievement gap and, in turn, paying off the racial education debt that has amassed in the United States.

### 1.3. Depressive Symptoms as a Mechanism Linking Racial Discrimination and Achievement

Recent studies have illustrated a link between racial discrimination and African American adolescent academic achievement. For example, racial discrimination has been linked with decreases in academic engagement, including curiosity, persistence, and student-reported grades (e.g., Neblett, Philip, Cogburn, & Sellers, 2006), and it has been found to reduce positive beliefs

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