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Mediated effects of perceived discrimination on adolescent academic achievement: A test of four models



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ABSTRACT

Many adolescents feel they are subjected to acts of discrimination. Research shows that discrimination is associated with adverse outcomes including poor psychological adjustment, school adjustment, and academic achievement. This study investigated alternative pathways through which discrimination affects adolescents' academic achievement. A sample of 244 Year 7–10 Australian secondary school students (65% male; $M_{\text{age}} = 13.6$ years; $SD = 1.24$) completed questionnaires measuring discrimination, psychological adjustment, and sense of school membership. Both at the time of questionnaire completion and one semester later, absenteeism data, teacher ratings of classroom behavior, and academic grades were retrieved from school records. The fit of four competing structural models were compared. In the best fitting model, the effects of prior discrimination on academic achievement one semester later were serially mediated, first through psychological adjustment, and then through school adjustment. By elucidating these mechanisms, the study informs theory and practice regarding the effects of discrimination on adolescents.

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Perceived discrimination concerns the unjust treatment of particular individuals or members of particular groups as experienced in day-to-day life (Banks, Kohn-Wood, & Spencer, 2006). Included are acts in which, relative to other people, targeted individuals are treated less courteously or respectfully, receive poorer service or diminished opportunities, are viewed as dishonest, threatening or of inferior character, and/or are insulted or harassed (Al Ramiah, Hewstone, Dovidio, & Penner, 2010; Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997). Between 30% and 60% of adolescents are estimated to experience discrimination in a given school year (Card & Hodges, 2008).

Two main approaches have been used in past research to assess perceived discrimination. Many researchers have focused on one or more domain-specific sources of discrimination such as race, religion, or gender (e.g., Davis et al., 2016; Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000), whereas others have assessed perceptions of discrimination more generally, without specifying the type or source of discrimination (e.g., Williams et al., 1997). These different forms of discrimination assessment have also been used in combination (e.g., El-Sheikh, Tu, Saini, Fuller-Rowell, & Buckhalt, 2016). In the present study, we focused on adolescents' subjective experience of discrimination in general, rather than a specific type or source of discrimination.

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Research has shown that perceived discrimination is associated with a range of adverse outcomes, including poor psychological adjustment (e.g., Hawker & Boulton, 2000), poor school adjustment (Bayram-Ozdemir & Stattin, 2014; Rueger & Jenkins, 2014; Totura, Karver, & Gesten, 2014), and poor academic performance (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Ruppel, Liersch, & Walter, 2015). The current research examined the relationship between experiences of discrimination and these outcomes. We focused on adolescents because evidence suggests that the prevalence of perceived discrimination may be high, and its outcomes severe, during adolescence (Rueger & Jenkins, 2014). We particularly sought to shed light on possible psychological adjustment and school adjustment pathways through which perceived discrimination adversely affects adolescents' academic achievement.

We conceptualized psychological adjustment as comprising high levels of subjective wellbeing, and low levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, and school adjustment as encompassing school attendance, adherence to school rules, and a sense of school membership – that is, feelings of being accepted, supported, and respected at school (Goodenow, 1993). By investigating the role of these adjustment processes in mediating the relationship between perceived discrimination and academic achievement, the current study makes three main contributions. First, it extends past findings regarding the strength of the associations between perceived discrimination, adjustment, and achievement variables. Second, it identifies the temporal sequence that best fits these variables. Third, through examination of a range of mediation models, it contributes to theory and practice pertaining to the adverse consequences of perceived discrimination, and the potential amelioration of these effects.

1. Perceived discrimination, and its associations with adjustment and academic achievement

Research has demonstrated that the experience of perceived discrimination is related to poor psychological adjustment. For example, perceived discrimination is associated with low levels of well-being (Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014), high anxiety (Fisher et al., 2000), and high depressive symptoms (Benner & Kim, 2009; Davis et al., 2016; Rueger & Jenkins, 2014). Perceived discrimination may have particularly detrimental effects on the mental health of adolescents as it may exacerbate the impact of multiple normative stressors associated with developmental changes during these years (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Rueger & Jenkins, 2014). Moreover, biological and cognitive changes may render adolescents increasingly sensitive to feedback from their social environment, and increasingly attuned to, and upset by, discriminatory acts (Blakemore & Mills, 2013; Peper & Dahl, 2013; Sebastian, Viding, Williams, & Blakemore, 2010).

Perceived discrimination is also associated with several indices of school maladjustment (Benner & Kim, 2009; DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006; Fisher et al., 2000; Hawker & Boulton, 2000). These include perceptions of the school environment as unsafe, frequent absenteeism, poor classroom behavior, and a weakened sense of school membership (Card & Hodges, 2008; DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006). In part, these negative outcomes may be due to perceived discrimination accentuating the in-group-out-group divide between those affected by and those perpetrating perceived discrimination (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005).

Finally, perceived discrimination is related to poor academic performance (Bayram-Ozdemir & Stattin, 2014). There exist significant school achievement gaps between adolescents targeted by perceived discrimination and those who experience little to no discrimination (Becker & Luthar, 2002; DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006). In longitudinal research by Benner and Kim (2009), earlier but not contemporaneous discrimination predicted academic performance, whereas prior academic performance did not predict later experiences of discrimination.

2. Psychological adjustment, school adjustment, and academic achievement

In this section, we examine the relationships between these various correlates of perceived discrimination. First, there is abundant evidence of positive associations between adolescents' psychological adjustment and school adjustment (Ruppel et al., 2015; Roeser, Eccles, & Freedman-Doan, 1999). Specifically, poor psychological adjustment is associated with negative attitudes to school, weakened student-teacher relations, reduced student engagement and sense of school membership, maladaptive classroom behaviors, and frequent absenteeism (Bayram-Ozdemir & Stattin, 2014; Card & Hodges, 2008; Ingul, Klöckner, Silverman, & Nordahl, 2012; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Macmillian & Hagan, 2004; Roeser, Eccles, & Strobel, 1998; Rueger & Jenkins, 2014; Schmidt, 2003).

Second, research reveals strong relationships between indices of psychological adjustment and academic achievement (e.g., Roeser et al., 1999). Longitudinal research by Hishinuma, Chang, McArdle, and Hamagami (2012) shows that prior depressive symptoms predict subsequent academic achievement, and not the other way around. Psychological distress, including anxiety and depression, tends to detract from academic focus, impair cognitive functioning, and trigger negative attitudes to school achievement (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Macmillian & Hagan, 2004).

Third, school adjustment and academic achievement are positively related (Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996; Roeser et al., 1998). Adolescents who perceive a sense of connectedness to, and social support from, their school environment are more engaged in their studies and achieve superior grades (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005). Similarly, students who behave well in class are likely to focus on their studies, and in turn, achieve high grades (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011). In contrast, student absenteeism is negatively related to academic achievement (Card & Hodges, 2008; Ingul et al., 2012).

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