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No experience required: Violent crime and anticipated, vicarious, and experienced racial discrimination

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing body of evidence linking racial discrimination and juvenile crime, and a number of theories explain this relationship. In this study, we draw on one popular approach, Agnew's general strain theory, and extend prior research by moving from a focus on experienced discrimination to consider two other forms, anticipated and vicarious discrimination. Using data on black, white, and Hispanic youth, from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN), we find that experienced, anticipated, and to a lesser extent, vicarious discrimination, significantly predict violent crime independent of a set of neighborhood, parental, and individual level controls, including prior violent offending. Additional analyses on the specific contexts of discrimination reveal that violence is associated with the anticipation of police discrimination. The effects tend to be larger for African American than Hispanic youth, but the differences are not statistically significant. These findings support the thesis that, like other strains, discrimination may not have to be experienced directly to influence offending.

1. Introduction

The last decade and a half have witnessed a revived interest in studying the relationship between racial discrimination and involvement in crime (Burt et al., 2012; Burt et al., 2017; Burt and Simons, 2013; Caldwell et al., 2004; Martin et al., 2011; McCord and Ensminger, 2003; Simons et al., 2003, 2006; Stewart and Simons, 2006; Le and Stockdale, 2011; Unnever et al., 2009). However, what is missing from this literature is consideration of whether one must experience discrimination first-hand for crime to result. In a recent study of Chicago adolescents, Herda (2016) finds that fear of being discriminated against is common and is more prevalent among African American and Hispanic youth compared to their white peers (52, 47, and 32 percent respectively). In addition, a greater proportion of African American and Hispanic parents report about being discriminated against (31, 26 and 11 percent, respectively). These patterns raise questions about whether worrying about the possibility of discrimination or knowing about a parent's discrimination have similar consequences for crime. Agnew (1992, 2001, 2012) general strain theory (GST) predicts that they will. According to Agnew (1992, 2002), anticipated (e.g., feared, but not necessarily experienced) and vicarious (e.g., indirect through the strain experienced by others) strain may operate in ways similar to experienced strain. Racial discrimination is an especially prominent source of strain (Agnew, 2001) and each form may influence offending. Our research advances the existing literature on discrimination and crime by examining whether direct experience with discrimination is the only source of the discrimination-crime link.

We examine experienced, anticipated, and vicarious strain with data on discrimination and crime among black, Hispanic, and white teenagers surveyed in the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN). Several scholars have begun to use these data for examining discrimination (Herda, 2016) and adolescent delinquency (Unnever et al., 2015, 2016) in part because they are from a large and racially diverse population in one of the more highly racially-segregated cities in the U.S (see Earls et al., 2000). Importantly, these

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data also contain a unique set of questions about whether respondents had been victims of racial discrimination (experienced), worried about discrimination (anticipated), and whether their parents have experienced discrimination (vicarious).

In addition, the current study considers whether the context of the discrimination matters. Most prior research uses a perceived discrimination measure that combines information from an array of people and settings. However, a number of studies highlight mistreatment of minority youth by specific groups, including the police and storekeepers (Harding, 2010; Rios, 2011). We investigate whether all sources of discrimination are equal or if some matter more for the discrimination-crime relationship. Additionally, we examine whether the effects of experienced, anticipated, and vicarious discrimination vary across contexts.

Finally, we consider whether the covariate adjustment approach, which has established the discrimination-offending association, obscures a selection processes. Adolescents are not randomly assigned to discrimination and non-discrimination experiences and it is possible that factors that predispose youth to discrimination simultaneously predispose them to offending. We use a counterfactual, propensity-matching analysis to address this issue. We compare offending between two groups of youth who have similar propensities for experienced, anticipated, and vicarious discrimination but who differ in whether or not they actually reported these.

In general, we find that covariate adjustment and counterfactual approaches provide evidence of links between violent crime and both experienced and anticipated discrimination, and to a lesser extent, vicarious discrimination. These results suggest that one need not experience discrimination first-hand to feel its consequences. We also document several nuances in the relationship between discrimination and crime based on the source of discrimination.

2. Strain, discrimination, and offending

There is now a good body of evidence of a link between perceived racial discrimination and adolescent crime; there are also several theories that explain this relationship. In their theory of African American offending, Unnever and Gabbidon (2011) argue that discrimination has a several consequences that contribute to offending, including its detrimental effects on social bonds and its encouragement of relationships with delinquent others. Research supports both predictions (Unnever et al., 2015, 2016). There is also support for Simons and colleagues' social schematic theory (e.g., see Simons and Burt, 2011; Burt et al., 2012) that discrimination encourages a hostile view of relationships and a criminogenic schema that excuses breaking the law. Research is also consistent with the further claim, made by both theories, that discrimination encourages negative emotions, such as anger, rage, shame and depression, and that these contribute further to crime (Burt et al., 2012; Simons et al., 2003, 2006; Unnever et al., 2016).

The argument that crime results from negative interactions with others and the negative emotions they inspire is also a cornerstone of Agnew (1992, 2001, 2012) general strain theory (GST). Agnew argues that interactions with others create strain by affecting adolescents' likelihood of achieving valued goals and avoiding undesirable experiences. This strain increases the frequency and intensity of a host of negative emotions and can alter perceptions about crime's potential costs and benefits. Negative emotions and altered views increase the probability of offending when the strain that causes them is intense, seen as unjust, and occurs with other criminogenic conditions or experiences (Agnew, 2001). (Agnew (2001): 346) notes that racial discrimination is a probable source of strain, in part because it "is likely to be seen as unjust and high in magnitude, particularly given the strong cultural emphasis in the United States on egalitarianism." (Anderson (1999), p. 46) concurs, arguing that, "the persistence of racial discrimination, has engendered deep-seated bitterness and anger in many of the most desperate and poorest blacks, especially young people" (also see Feagin and McKinney, 2003).

2.1. Experienced, anticipated and vicarious discrimination

GST focuses mostly on strains individuals directly experience, but Agnew (1992) notes that strain may not need to be first-hand; instead, both anticipated and vicarious strain may contribute independently to offending. Anticipated strain occurs when people expect that a strain will arise in the future or that a current strain will endure. The intensity of an anticipated strain increases with perceptions about its likelihood, immediacy, and magnitude. Anticipated strain encourages people to offend in the hopes that it will reduce current strain, prevent a future one, or discourage actions by someone who, in the future, may be a source of strain.

Vicarious strain occurs when individuals discover and empathize with the harm experienced by significant others, regardless of their own exposure to this type of harm. The intensity of this strain increases under several conditions: with the closeness of the relationship; as individuals' identification with the victim increases; when the strain is ongoing, as opposed to resolved; and when individuals witness or hear first-hand accounts of the strain. Vicarious strain will be greater when individuals see or hear about family members' (compared to strangers) or members' of one's racial group (compared to members of other racial groups) experiences with strains. Vicarious strains may motivate individuals to use offending as a way to stop or weaken another's strain, to prevent it from occurring for another or one's self in the future, or to avenge another's victimization.

Most research on discrimination focuses on experienced rather than anticipated discrimination; however, several studies report that sizable proportions of racial and ethnic minority respondents worry that they will be discriminated against. In a sample of students from four U.S. colleges, Eskilson and Wiley (1999) find that, on average, minority youth were more than twice as likely as whites to report that they anticipated that they would experience discrimination and that racism would be a serious obstacle to their achieving economic success. In a recent study that uses the PHDCN data, Herda (2016) finds that roughly half of the racial minority respondents reported anticipating discrimination in at least one of eight contexts and that these fears were most common in contexts where racial out-groups were numerous and among youth who had previously been discriminated against.[1] According to (Unnever

[1] Herda (2016) calls this discrimination fear rather than anticipated discrimination; we use the latter because our work focuses on Agnew's GST.