

Racist Interpretations of Student Behavior

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Special Area Qualifying Exam

August 5, 2020

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Critical race theory asks us to notice the ways that societal institutions disadvantage racial minorities, focusing on the unique experiences and needs of these groups and moving toward social justice (Giroux, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1998). In the United States, African American students are subject to a disproportionate amount of discipline (Gregory et al., 2010) and are more likely than any other race to be suspended, expelled, arrested and referred to law enforcement (Department of Education, 2014). Suspension and expulsion are associated with short-term outcomes, including reduced academic achievement, which cascade over time, eventually resulting in an increased school dropout and involvement in the juvenile justice system (Bradshaw, Schaeffer, et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2014).

This paper reviews existing research related to White teachers' racist interpretations of African American student behavior, and the impact of these interpretations on teachers' disciplinary decisions. Existing research illustrates the impact of racism on White teachers' ratings of African American students' behavior, explanations for African American students' misbehavior, predictions of repeated behavior, and recommended disciplinary actions for second-offending African American students. The research also illustrates that White teachers do not acknowledge the role of racism in their decisions. In the future, I intend to investigate how to change teachers' racist interpretations and disciplinary decisions.

Section One: Critical Race Theory

The theoretical framework for this paper is critical race theory, or CRT. CRT is based on overcoming “the social structures through which people are dominated and oppressed” and is inspired by the work of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019). According to critical theory of education, school is an institution that furthers

the success of the dominant group at the expense of the non-dominant group (Freire, 1968/2005; Giroux, 1983). Schools reproduce social, economic and political inequalities. Individuals who wish to resist inequality in education must resist it in curriculum, systems of instruction and modes of evaluation.

Critical race theory in education focuses on the ways that schools disadvantage racial minorities (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1998; López, 2003) and is based on six key ideas (Capper, 2015). The first two are the permeance of racism and critiques of liberalism. These concepts state that because racism is integrated in every part of the education system, liberal or color-blind approaches ignore race and perpetuate racism (Capper, 2015; Crenshaw, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

A third tenant of CRT is counter-storytelling, which is based on the idea that if racism is everywhere, it shapes the stories that people tell. Even “objective” research may uphold deficit ideas, and as such, counter-stories are based on the experiences and knowledge of people of color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). A fourth tenant of CRT is “Whiteness as property” (Harris, 1993) which means that Whiteness allows access to privilege and rights. For example, in schooling, White property includes the curriculum, AP/honors/gifted systems and school funding (Capper, 2015). Access to these properties is unequal for White students vs. students of color (Capper, 2015). The fifth and sixth tenants of CRT are intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2015) and interest convergence (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Section Two: The Discipline Gap

One topic related to critical race theory in education is known as the “discipline gap,” (Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2014) which refers to data that illustrates that students of color, especially Black students, are disproportionately disciplined in schools. Across the United

States, Black students are most likely to be suspended from preschool, are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than White students, and are disproportionately arrested and referred to law enforcement (Department of Education, 2014).

Some people might link disproportionate discipline with socioeconomic status, parenting styles or school factors. However, the data does not match such conclusions about school factors or socioeconomic status. After disaggregating data by race and income level, one report found that Black race – more than any other racial or socio-economic characteristic – is correlated with a higher chance of suspension, multiple suspensions, length of suspension, and suspension for violent and non-violent behaviors (Barrett et al., 2017). Black students have significantly greater odds of receiving office discipline referrals than White students, even after controlling for the teachers' reported level of problem behavior, teacher ethnicity, and the percent of children per class with referrals (Bradshaw, Mitchell, et al., 2010). Similar results were found by (Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010) and (Gopalan & Nelson, 2019).

The type of school punishment of greatest concern is exclusionary discipline, which involves removing the student from the learning environment through office referral, in and out of school suspension and expulsion (Long et al., 2019). The discipline and achievement gaps might be two related problems (Gregory et al., 2010). Specifically, school suspensions account for one-fifth of the academic achievement gap between Black and White students (Morris & Perry, 2016). Even more concerning, the short-term academic gap produced by unequal discipline results in even worse long-term impacts, such as school drop-out and involvement in the prison system (Howard, 2008; Skiba et al., 2014). Exclusionary discipline is significantly negatively correlated with academic achievement and significantly positively correlated with school drop-out rates (Noltemeyer et al., 2015).

There are generally four levels of misbehavior in the classroom: distractibility/disruption, disobedience, delinquency, and aggression (Martin et al., 1999). The majority of teacher disciplinary referrals for African American students relate to disruption or disobedience. A recent dissertation studying Black elementary students' behavior infractions found that "disruption of school" was the most common cause of referrals (55% of referrals) (McClay, 2018). Another three-year study of 24,347 middle and high school students found that "disruptive behavior" was the most-cited class 1 violation, while "disobedience" was the most-cited class 2 violation (Morris & Perry, 2016). A third study of an elementary school recorded 127 separate incidents for "defiance," second only to "disorderly conduct" (Dyke, 2015). In this study, African American students made up 75% of referrals (Dyke, 2015), despite making up approximately 30% of the student population.

Section Three: White Teachers, Interpretation, and Racism

White Teachers

Some research has illustrated that when compared to Black teachers, White teachers give more disciplinary referrals to Black students (Cheng, 2019; Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Lindsay & Hart, 2017). For example, Lindsay & Hart (2017) found that for Black elementary and middle school students, the greater the share of Black teachers they are exposed to, the less likely they are to be suspended or expelled. The authors estimated that if Black students had all-Black teachers, they would receive 2 to 3 percent less exclusionary discipline in a school year. Cheng (2019) also found similar results in a high school sample, estimating that increasing Black teachers by even one percent is associated with lower suspension rates among Black students. Another study found that reports of Black student disruption almost disappear when the students are transferred to a Black teacher (Downey & Pribesh, 2004). In a study that observed and coded

teacher reactions to student misbehavior, White teachers in urban schools had significantly more negative reactions to student misbehavior than Black teachers in urban schools (Battey et al., 2018). A literature review of student-teacher racial match found that Black students' "externalizing problem behavior" is the only measure that consistently differs depending on teacher-student racial match (Redding, 2019).

Interpretation

At any given time, there are many different things that happen in a classroom, therefore, teachers cannot notice everything at once (Anderson-Levitt, 1984; Wolff et al., 2017). What teachers perceive is not random, instead, they look for certain behaviors that they expect to see based on their memory of previous events and understandings/theories about their students (Anderson-Levitt, 1984; Wolff et al., 2017).

Interpretation involves making sense of and deriving meaning from sensory information (Wolff et al., 2017). Teachers' interpretation is impacted both by what they see in real time and their mental processing, which includes their knowledge and theories (Anderson-Levitt, 1984; Wolff et al., 2017). As such, teachers may notice the same event but interpret it in different ways (Keddie, 1971). People interpret perceived behavior based less on what they observe and more on their long-held theories (Leiter, 1976). Teachers use their memory, theories, and understanding of socially and contextually appropriate behavior to determine how to express their interpretations (Anderson-Levitt, 1984). Teachers may choose to express approval or praise in hopes that it will increase good behavior, or they may choose to signal disapproval or reprimand in order to decrease inappropriate behaviors (Beaman & Wheldall, 2000; Lewis & Sugai, 1999).

Racism

Racism is defined as “a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). According to critical race theory, racism, both conscious and unconscious, is a fixture in American life (Capper, 2015). If racism is a part of American life, then it certainly may play a role in White teachers’ disciplinary decisions. Therefore, racism must be explicitly acknowledged and discussed as a solution to the discipline dilemma (Carter et al., 2017; Deckman, 2017; Welsh & Little, 2018).

Section Four: How Does Racism Impact White Teachers’ Disciplinary Decisions and Interpretation of Black Students’ Behavior? A Literature Review.

Guided by White teachers’ disproportionate disciplinary referrals for Black students (Cheng, 2019; Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Lindsay & Hart, 2017), and the ideas that interpretation is subjective (Anderson-Levitt, 1984) and racism is ubiquitous (Capper, 2015), I reviewed existing literature to better understand White teachers’ disciplinary decisions and racist interpretations of Black students’ behavior.

I conducted various searches in academic databases utilizing the terms “teacher,” “student,” “African American student,” “Black student,” “White teacher,” “teacher race,” along with “interpretation,” “cognition,” “thoughts,” “perceptions,” and “beliefs”. I found eight peer-reviewed studies related to White teachers’ interpretation of Black students’ behavior that mentioned racism and discipline (Deckman, 2017; Fowler et al., 2008; Golann, 2015; Gregory & Mosely, 2004; Jackson, 2002; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Morris, 2005; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015).

Five of the studies were qualitative. Gregory & Mosely (2014) and Jackson (2002) used interviews. Deckman (2017) analyzed teachers' online posts. Golann (2015) and Morris (2005) used ethnographic methods to observe and survey teachers. Three studies (Fowler et al., 2008; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015) used a quantitative method to find a statistical correlation between students' race and teachers' interpretation of students' behavior. All of the studies were based in the United States, and all involved K-12 teachers except for Kunesh & Noltemeyer (2019) who studied pre-service teachers.

Racism Impacts Interpretations of Student Behavior

The first finding from the literature review is that racism *does* play a role in teachers' interpretations and decision making. Five studies support this finding (Fowler et al., 2008; Jackson, 2002; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; O'Conner et al., 2014; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). The sub-sections below will discuss *how* racism impacts teachers' interpretations and disciplinary decisions.

Race Impacts Teachers' Explanations of Why Students Misbehave

First, Jackson (2002) asked White teachers to explain the causes of school problems for Black and White children. The researcher found that racism impacts teacher interpretations. Specifically, teachers stated that when White students misbehave, it is because they are facing difficult circumstances, such as trouble at home. On the other hand, teachers explained that when Black and Hispanic students misbehave, it is because they are naturally disrespectful, aggressive and hostile.

Race Impacts Teachers' Expectation of Bad Student Behavior

Second, Kunesh & Noltemeyer (2019) randomly assigned White pre-service teachers to read a vignette about either a Black or White student's misbehavior. The researchers identified

the race of the student by utilizing a stereotypically Black or White name. They found that participants would not discipline students differently depending on their race. However, participants did state that Black students would be more likely than White students to repeat bad behavior.

Race Impacts Teachers' Hypothetical Discipline for Second-Offense

Third, Okonofua & Eberhardt (2015) exposed teachers to a picture of a middle school, an audio recording of a disciplinary referral and a vignette of a students' disciplinary record. The researchers manipulated the race of the student in the recording and vignette by using a stereotypically Black or White name. They found no impact of student race on discipline ratings for a first-offense. However, race did significantly impact teachers' discipline ratings for a second-offense. In addition, teachers were more likely to label a Black student than a White student as a "trouble maker".

Race Impacts How Teachers' Interpret Students' Movement

Fourth, Morris (2005) conducted an ethnographic study to determine how teachers utilize their cultural capital as a framework to regulate the body movements of students, a topic known as bodily discipline. Morris (2005) found that adults perceived African American students' behavior as bad and threatening, African American girls as not lady-like and White and Asian American students' behavior as nonthreatening.

Race Impacts How Teachers' Describe Their Students' Behaviors

Fifth, Fowler et al. (2008) utilized a survey to collect data on kindergarten teachers' ratings of students' social functioning, students' academic performance and teacher-student relationship quality. The researchers found that White teachers were more likely than Black

teachers to describe Black students in less favorable ways, such as being externalizing and less pro-social.

Color-Blind Approaches

Interestingly, three other studies (Deckman, 2017; Golann, 2015; Gregory & Mosely, 2004) explicitly asked teachers to elaborate about their thoughts on discipline and found that teachers did were not critical. Either they ignored the role of racism or stated that it did not impact their classroom decision making.

First, Gregory & Mosely (2004) interviewed 14 White, 4 African American and 1 Latino high school teachers about the causes of their students' behavior problems. They found that even when they were explicitly asked about it, only 10% of teachers acknowledged how racial issues may arise in teacher beliefs and practices. This led the researchers to conclude that the teachers' theories were culture-blind and race-blind. Interestingly, the only White teacher who resisted racism stated after being told that she was "racist" by her students, she reflected on how she might be racist. While she would have previously seen students her students as "out of control," afterward, she saw them as "engaged".

Second, Golann (2015) conducted ethnographic research in a school where teachers were predominantly White and two-thirds of the students were Black. The school taught teachers to utilize constant classroom management in order to stop students' race, poverty, or previous school experiences from hindering academic success. The researcher was surprised that even though several students mentioned that some of their teachers were racist, the teachers did not address race when discussing classroom management and discipline.

Third, Deckman (2017) analyzed seven novice high school teachers' online posts about classroom management and discipline. The researcher divided teachers into two groups:

racially-dominant (Caucasian) and racial outsiders (African American, Native American, Asian American). The study found that when race-related incidents took place in their classrooms, educators from dominant backgrounds did not take a critical role to systemic racism. Instead they responded to racial incidents by stating that “all people are equal,” which is similar to a liberal approach to racism.

Section Five: Summary & Future Questions

To summarize, existing research supports the idea that racism plays a role in White teachers’ interpretations of Black students’ behavior and teachers’ subsequent disciplinary decisions (Fowler et al., 2008; Jackson, 2002; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; O’Conner et al., 2014; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). White teachers were more likely than African American teachers to label their African American students’ behaviors as threatening (Morris, 2005), externalizing and less pro-social (Fowler et al., 2008). Teachers believe Black students’ misbehavior is due to intrinsic problems (Jackson, 2002) and that Black students are more likely than White students to repeat bad behavior (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019). Further, the research indicated that teachers are more likely to suggest discipline for twice-offending African American students than they are for twice-offending White students (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015).

Other evidence illustrates that teachers are not likely to discuss the role of racism in their disciplinary decision making (Deckman, 2017; Golann, 2015; Gregory & Mosely, 2004). Given the negative connotation about racism in society, this “contradiction” makes sense. Indeed, a recent survey found that teachers are less likely than the general public to report holding negative racial stereotypes (Quinn, 2017). Just because teachers do not *report* being racist, however, does not mean that racism does not influence their decision making on a subconscious level. Indeed,

evaluation and judgement are automatic processes that take place in the subconscious mind (Bargh & Ferguson, 2000).

This literature review has answered many questions. At the same time, it has opened doors to further inquiry. I would like to further study how teachers' racist interpretations and behaviors can be changed. Therefore, I wonder (a) How would White teachers reflect and respond to data related to the discipline gap? At present, there are only two other publications that have researched this topic (Gregory & Mosely, 2004; Irby, 2018). I also might be interested to explore (b) How do White teachers interpret video-recordings of their Black students' behavior?

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