

Persistently Harsh Punishments Amid Efforts to Reform: Using Tools From Social Psychology to Counteract Racial Bias in School Disciplinary Decisions

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In response to concerns about overly harsh and racially inequitable school discipline, schools have introduced disciplinary reforms. However, even in schools where these reformative programs are present, many students continue to be subject to developmentally inappropriate discipline and striking racial gaps in disciplinary outcomes persist. Teachers' implicit racial bias likely contributes to racial disparities in school discipline. In this article, I highlight two social psychological skills—perspective-taking and individuating—that have been found to reduce the effects of implicit bias in nonschool settings. I suggest that if developed in educators, these social psychological skills could also help reduce racial disparities in school discipline. I discuss implications for future research and policy.

Keywords: disparities; equity; ethnicity; race; qualitative research

In the 1980s, in response to reports of increasing violence in urban schools, officials across the nation initiated new efforts to reduce school crime and misbehavior. In the following decade, a series of high-profile school shootings occurred. Federal and state lawmakers incentivized school administrators to respond to disciplinary infractions with exclusionary punishments like expulsion and suspension as well as hire police officers as school resource officers (Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riestenberg, 2006; Welch & Payne, 2011). By the end of the 1990s, many schools had adopted more severe and rigid disciplinary codes and expanded their security systems (Hirschfield, 2018). Zero-tolerance policies, which seek to deter misbehavior through severe and automatic penalties (e.g., suspension) for even minor misconduct, were widely adopted (Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Stinchcomb et al., 2006). However, as many researchers have pointed out, harsh school discipline codes clash with students' developmental needs and are often administered in a way that reinforces racial inequality (Kupchik, 2010, 2016).

As remedies to overly harsh and racially inequitable school discipline, schools have introduced interventions such as restorative justice, social-emotional learning, and schoolwide positive behavioral supports. However, striking racial gaps persist even in schools with these and other reforms (González, 2014; Gregory

& Fergus, 2017; Vincent & Tobin, 2010). Indeed, many students continue to be punished in ways that harm their social and emotional development, school attachment, and sense of justice (Diamond & Lewis, 2016; Kupchik, 2016; Preiss, Arum, Edelman, Morrill, & Tyson, 2016). When students observe inequalities in how educators discipline students from different race groups, they are also receiving troubling messages about who rightfully belongs at school (Carter, 2003; A. Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Rios, 2011). For students of color, racial discipline gaps can threaten a sense of safety and school belonging (Ferguson, 2000; Noguera, 2008; Rios, 2011) and create negative associations of schooling with stigmatization and discrimination (Inzlicht, Good, Levin, & Van Laar, 2006).

In this article, I draw from non-school based research to highlight two social psychological skills that are thought to reduce the effects of implicit racial bias. I suggest that if developed in educators, these two social psychological skills—individuating (deliberate efforts to focus on details about a person other than his or her social group belonging) and perspective-taking (intentional efforts to imagine another person's perspective)—could help reduce implicit

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bias and racial disparities in discipline. Following that, I highlight avenues for future research on implicit racial bias and disciplinary processes and outcomes.

Racial Disparities Despite Disciplinary Reforms

Developmentally inappropriate punishments are those that fail to meet the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive needs and strengths of students (Eccles et al., 1993; Hart, Burts, & Charlesworth, 1997). Considerable evidence now supports the premise of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) that the need for felt autonomy is characteristic of all stages of human development (e.g., Smetana, 2011). It follows that punishments that deny students the chance to experience self-determination in the educational environment will be developmentally inappropriate for students irrespective of age.

Persistent Racial Gaps

Within schools, Black, Hispanic, and Native American students are especially vulnerable to harsh and developmentally inappropriate punishments relative to White and Asian students (Ferguson, 2000; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Across schools, educators also discipline students differently. Urban schools with higher concentrations of Black and poor students tend to employ harsher and less developmentally appropriate discipline than schools with greater concentrations of White and Asian and middle- or upper-income students (Payne & Welch, 2010, 2015; Ramey, 2015).¹

Interventions such as restorative justice, social-emotional learning, and schoolwide positive behavioral supports have been introduced as antidotes to exclusionary and racially inequitable school discipline (Kupchik & Hirschfield, 2016). However, racial gaps in disciplinary outcomes persist even in schools with these and other reforms (González, 2014; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Vincent & Tobin, 2010).

A longitudinal study on the effects of restorative justice in the Denver Public Schools provides a telling example. Over a seven-year period, the implementation of restorative justice was associated with a reduction in the district's overall suspension rate, from 11% to 6%. Although racial disparities in discipline were also reduced, significant gaps remained. Specifically, the Black/White discipline gap went from 12 points in 2006 to just over 8 points in 2013 (10% for Black students vs. 2% for White students; González, 2014). Similarly, in a study of school districts in Syracuse and Cleveland that implemented social-emotional learning, rates of exclusionary discipline were reduced, including among Black students. However, Black students' rates of exclusionary punishments remained substantially higher than those of White students (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Studies of schoolwide positive behavioral supports indicate a similar trend. Based on a study of 77 schools, Vincent and Tobin (2010) concluded that the primary beneficiaries of schoolwide positive behavioral supports are White students as Black students in schools with schoolwide positive behavioral supports continued to experience exclusionary discipline at disproportionately high rates.

Racial Bias and Challenges to Implementation

Studies indicate that there is wide variation across schools in fidelity of implementation of disciplinary alternatives such as restorative justice, social-emotional learning, and schoolwide positive behavioral supports (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016; T. J. Lewis et al., 2010; McCluskey et al., 2008; Molloy, Moore, Trail, Van Epps, & Hopfer, 2013; Stinchcomb et al., 2006). In schools with low fidelity of implementation, we can expect that students will continue to be punished in ways that are overly harsh and students of color will disproportionately experience the most severe punishments (M. Morris, 2016; Skiba et al., 2011). While racial disparities in discipline are a multifaceted, macrosystemic problem that involves processes that extend beyond interpersonal bias, one reason why current disciplinary reforms may not have been more successful in eliminating the racial discipline gap could have to do with how implicit racial bias affects fidelity of implementation.

More research is needed on challenges to the implementation of reforms designed to reduce racial disproportionality in punishment. In what follows, I consider three potential barriers to fidelity of implementation in disciplinary reform, all of which concern implicit racial bias. As the literature on implementation science suggests, low fidelity can occur for a range of reasons, including weak or missing implementation support, training, and accountability checks (Forman, Olin, Hoagwood, Crowe, & Saka, 2009). The discussion that follows speculates about how implicit racial bias, in particular, may also hamper the fidelity of disciplinary reform implementation.

In recent years, scholars have theorized that interpersonal biases could contribute to racial gaps in disciplinary outcomes (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2017; Smolkowski, Girvan, McIntosh, Nese, & Horner, 2016; Warikoo, Sinclair, Fei, & Jacoby-Senghor, 2016). Non-school based research consistently shows that these biases are near universal and influence real-world behavior (for summaries, see Richardson & Goff, 2016; Warikoo et al., 2016). At the same time, researchers have yet to establish that teachers with more implicit racial bias tend to discipline Black students more harshly because of those implicit racial biases relative to their colleagues with less implicit racial bias. Certainly, more research is needed to establish a link between implicit racial bias and students' outcomes (Warkoo et al., 2016).

Nonetheless, it seems plausible that challenges to the fidelity of implementation of disciplinary reforms could be related to educators' implicit pro-White and anti-Black bias. Indeed, racial biases could influence teachers' interactions with students, even in the face of reformist programming. Racial gaps in discipline are largest in the offense categories that require the most subjective judgment, such as disrespect, excessive noise, threatening behavior, or loitering (Skiba et al., 2002). Most current reformist disciplinary initiatives are unlikely to reduce the need for teachers' subjective judgment in determining that a behavior is problematic.² Further, teachers are known to engage in "principled resistance" to educational reforms that clash with their professional principles, self-understanding, emotional responses, and framing of the problems that proponents of the reform aim to address (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Coburn, 2006).

Research also suggests that teachers' beliefs about *why* problem behavior occurs relate to how they respond to it, and many teachers locate the source of problem behavior within the child. Because of implicit and explicit racial biases, this is especially true if the child is from a historically stigmatized racial group (for a review, see Gregory & Mosely, 2004). Viewing the source of the problem as internal to the child obstructs teachers from examining how their actions can contribute to problems (Gregory & Mosely, 2004).

Racial biases may also interact with teachers' punitive mindsets in ways that are harmful to students of color. Teachers with a punitive or zero-tolerance mindset believe and behave as though the best way to deter student misbehavior is through the application of harsh, automatic, and exclusionary school punishments (McCluskey et al., 2008; Stinchcomb et al., 2006). Teachers' punitive mindsets about discipline appear to be especially salient in promoting racial disparities in disciplinary outcomes (Okonofua, Paunesku, & Walton, 2016).

In addition, teachers' professional training in discipline practices and development is often insufficient. Researchers find that teachers' preservice professional training in classroom management is ineffective or entirely lacking (Christofferson & Sullivan, 2015). Many teachers—especially novices—report that their greatest need is for additional training in classroom management (Rollin, Subotnik, Bassford, & Smulson, 2008). Teachers' knowledge of child and adolescent development may also be insufficient: At the preservice level, teachers typically take a basic course in psychology that lacks information about how best to apply knowledge about human development to everyday classroom management (Koller & Bertel, 2006). When teachers lack knowledge and skills about how best to manage student behavior, the effects of implicit and explicit racial bias may be especially pronounced, especially when they are at “vulnerable decision points,” as when they are particularly stressed or tired (Smolkowski et al., 2016; Warikoo et al., 2016). Past research shows that racial biases play a more significant role in actions that take place under pressure or uncertainty about how best to respond (Warikoo et al., 2016).

Social Psychological Processes Known to Reduce the Effects of Racial Bias

Educational researchers have called for social psychological interventions to reduce teachers' implicit racial bias (Warikoo et al., 2016). Research on professional decision making in a range of institutional settings, including education, medicine, and the law, can be used to identify the processes that may be most helpful in supporting educators in overcoming the effects of racial bias on decision making. Chapman, Kaatz, and Carnes (2013, p. 1508) recommend creating interventions based on the idea of implicit bias as a “habit of mind” that can be modified through deliberate effort. As with any behavioral change, individuals must first gain awareness of their undesirable habits and then be offered techniques for changing them. (On the relationship between a person's knowledge of his or her implicit bias and capacity for change, see Burgess, van Ryn, Dovidio, & Saha, 2007; Fazio & Olson, 2003.) After that, educators could learn techniques for individuating and perspective-taking.

Individuating

The strategy of individuating appears to help reduce the effects of implicit pro-White/anti-Black racial bias on decision making (for a review, see Burgess et al., 2007). Individuating involves deliberate efforts to focus on specific details about a person, increasing the salience of these details relative to information about the person's social category (e.g., race or gender). For instance, studies of medical decision making suggest that when physicians are presented with individuating information about a patient, the effects of gender bias in diagnosis are reduced (Chapman et al., 2013). It makes sense that when teachers are encouraged to get to know their students better as individuals and attend to students' cues more closely, stronger teacher-student relationships develop. For teachers, the salience of students' race may also diminish relative to the students' other qualities. Because of longstanding racial associations between Blackness and deviance (Diamond & Lewis, 2016; Rios, 2011), reducing the salience of students' Blackness could reduce racial disparities in discipline.

Perspective-Taking and Empathy

Perspective-taking, which involves intentional efforts to imagine another person's perspective, is also known to mitigate the effects of implicit racial bias on social interaction (Chapman et al., 2013). Perspective-taking is thought of as a cognitive process, while empathy is an emotional reaction, feeling what someone else feels (Galinsky, Maddux, Gilin, & White, 2008). The two are related as perspective-taking is thought to stimulate affective empathy, while affective empathy helps in adopting the other's perspective (Batson et al., 1997).

Increasing teachers' empathy for students may be a reasonable way to reduce implicit racial bias. When nurses who viewed photographs of White and Black patients were told to provide patients with the best care, nurses recommended significantly higher doses for White than Black patients. Presumably, their implicit pro-White, anti-Black racial bias led them to feel more empathy for White patients (Drwecki, Moore, Ward, & Prkachin, 2011). However, when nurses were asked to imagine how patients' pain affected their lives (a perspective-taking intervention), the pain treatment bias was reduced by 55% (Drwecki et al., 2011). In other research, participants in an online video game who were prompted to take the perspective of a Black graduate student, Jamal, showed reduced implicit racial bias as measured by their responses to the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) but only when they also showed high empathy for Jamal (Gutierrez et al., 2014). The findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that perspective-taking can prompt empathy (Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002; Batson et al., 1997), which in turn weakens automatic expressions of racial biases (Todd, Bodenhausen, Richeson, & Galinsky, 2011).

In thinking about the benefits of interventions that ask educators to engage in individuation and perspective-taking, it is important to note that perspective-taking without individuation may do little to mitigate the effects of racial bias on decision making. Widespread cultural narratives link Blackness with

deviance and Whiteness with innocence (Diamond & Lewis, 2016). Educators with strong anti-Black and pro-White racial biases who strive to imagine students' perspectives may be prone to imagine Black students' motives as deviant (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015) and White students' motives as innocent. Thus, individuation may be necessary to reduce the effects of racial bias on how educators engage in perspective-taking.

Current School Disciplinary Initiatives

Recent disciplinary initiatives such as restorative justice, social-emotional learning, and schoolwide positive behavioral supports aim to accomplish developmentally appropriate discipline for all students, regardless of their racial background. However, racial bias may pose challenges to the implementation of these initiatives. To overcome these problems, educational policymakers and leaders should consider targeting teachers' implicit racial bias through add-ons or modifications to these programs. Research on racial bias in decision making suggests that add-ons that prompt teachers to engage in individuation and perspective-taking have a high likelihood of reducing the effects of racial bias on disciplinary decision making (Burgess et al., 2007; Chapman et al., 2013).

It also appears that increasing the quality and type of information that decision makers have about others can promote individuating and thus reduce bias. When medical personnel were provided with information about patients' unique medical histories rather than the social groups they belonged to, the effects of implicit bias on their medical decision making were reduced (Chapman et al., 2013). Along the same lines, we might provide systematic ways for teachers to learn about and focus on students' interests, goals, and hobbies. For instance, teachers across grade levels could use writing assignments to learn more about their students, thus providing them with information about the student beyond his or her social category.

Interventions to increase the practices of perspective-taking and empathy among teachers might rely on imagery techniques that have been successful in reducing the effects of implicit racial bias in experimental research (e.g., Dovidio et al., 2004; see also Burgess et al., 2007). Often, these techniques involve asking subjects to imagine themselves thinking another person's thoughts or living in another person's situation. For instance, after giving a student a disciplinary referral, teachers could be asked to debrief with a peer and "imagine [themselves] living in the shoes of the student . . . feeling what (s)he feels." Research also suggests that role-play exercises can heighten empathy (Cosgray, Davidhizar, Grostefon, Powell, & Wringer, as cited in Burgess et al., 2007).

At the same time, research provides clues to suggest that there may be times and situations when implicit racial bias is more likely to override individuating and perspective-taking. Smolkowski et al. (2016) find that disproportionality is more likely to occur when the problem behavior is subjectively defined, when the problem behavior is more severe, and in the early morning, when teachers are more likely to be stressed and focused on maintaining students' attention on academic matters. Smolkowski et al. refer to these as "vulnerable decision-making point" (VDPs) and suggest numerous ways to use these findings to reduce disproportionality in school discipline.

These include providing more specific definitions of subjective problem behaviors such as defiance and disrespect, teaching educators about the ODRs (office discipline referrals) that are most susceptible to bias, coaching teachers in alternative responses to problem behavior, and considering preventive approaches, such as heightening student engagement in classroom instruction. Future research could investigate whether such interventions actually reduce school discipline disparities.

Implications and Future Directions

Racial disparities in discipline arise from numerous processes, including those related to systematic racism. For instance, Black students face continuing socioeconomic disadvantages relative to their White counterparts. These socioeconomic disadvantages contribute to the Black/White discipline gap, although the racial gap remains even when controlling for students' free/reduced-price lunch status (E. W. Morris & Perry, 2016). Racialized minority students are also disproportionately likely to lack access to engaging instruction (Tyson, 2011) and be placed in special education programs (Skiba et al., 2008), both of which can heighten students' vulnerability to school punishment (Leone, Mayer, Malmgren, & Meisel, 2000). Positive change will require researchers and policymakers to imagine specific policies that could help mitigate the downstream effects of structural racism. Throughout this article, I have suggested that in addition to the consequences of systemic racism, interpersonal biases may play a role in racial discipline gaps. Future research should rigorously test this hypothesis. For instance, researchers could trace whether there are in fact differences in ODRs for educators with higher and lower scores on the Implicit Association Test (IAT) (Greenwald et al., 1998).

Racial disparities in discipline emerge both within and across schools. In future research, social psychologists could offer theoretically informed hypotheses about how implicit racial bias influences teachers' responses to Black students within schools where they are the majority and in schools where they are a minority. More research is also needed on how racial bias affects students of color depending on their socioeconomic status, gender, and skin color. Social psychologists can also develop measures to test how educators across a broad range of school contexts respond to interventions aimed at reducing punitive mindsets, on the one hand, and implicit racial bias, on the other, as well as interventions that combine the two strategies (for a recent example, see Okonofua et al., 2016).

Scholars of school discipline can provide a deep understanding of how school discipline operates within different school environments and affects students and how educators' biases and mindsets affect racial gaps in discipline. Those who do observational work will be able to document when, how, and where educators already engage in the processes of individuation and perspective-taking. This kind of descriptive research is important because it establishes a baseline against which to measure the success or failure of future initiatives and indicates areas where educators may be in particular need of support. Indeed, an essential task moving forward will be to outline concrete ideas about what racially equitable and developmentally appropriate discipline would look like for students at different stages of

development.³ It is also crucially important to attend to differences in how school disciplinary processes and outcomes affect Black students depending on their social class and gender locations (O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007).

Those who investigate policy implementation will be able to contribute a broad understanding of the policy challenges that are likely to arise as educators strive to implement more developmentally appropriate and racially equitable discipline. If links between educators' implicit racial biases and students' outcomes are established, policy implementation scholars can provide insight into how best to deliver interventions that target the social psychological processes known to reduce racial bias in decision making. Further, even if future research finds that implicit racial bias does not contribute to the inequitable treatment of students, training educators to engage in individuating and perspective taking could still benefit students as these skills are likely to improve the quality of teacher-student relationships.

Earlier, I cautioned that there might be risks associated with interventions that prompt educators to engage in perspective-taking without individuation. The danger is that educators would use their perspective-taking skills to imagine students' motives but, still influenced by racial narratives, imagine only White students' motives as innocent. Future research could investigate whether this is a real danger by teasing out differences in how educators discipline students of different races depending on whether they are taught techniques only for perspective-taking or techniques for both (perspective-taking and individuation).

Finally, future research should also examine when and how current disciplinary reforms, including restorative justice, social-emotional learning (SEL), and schoolwide positive behavioral supports (SWPBS), encourage perspective-taking and individuating. All three of these reforms have the stated goal of reducing students' misbehavior and simultaneously delivering punishments in a way that is developmentally appropriate and racially equitable. Each of these reforms includes components that could encourage educators to engage in perspective-taking or individuation with students. However, none of them have mandatory or explicit ways of providing educators with the tools they would need to engage in these processes in everyday interactions with students.

If school-based research were to confirm that racial disproportionately in school discipline is reduced when educators are trained and encouraged to engage in perspective-taking and individuation with students, then it would be well for professional development to focus on these skills. Not only could racial bias and its effects on teacher decision making be reduced, but teacher-student relationships could also be strengthened. Improving the quality of teacher-student interactions is beneficial for all students, and we can expect it to carry additional benefits for students from stigmatized racial groups.⁴ After all, it is these students who grapple most directly with the legacy of racism in American society (Carter et al., 2017).

Overall, the conclusion from the synthesis of research on school discipline with the literature on racial bias and decision making suggests that if the goal of future disciplinary reform is to make school discipline more developmentally appropriate

and racially equitable, then interventions that target educators' perspective-taking and individuating hold promise.

NOTES

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¹Racial disproportionality in punishment is evident in Latinx/White and Native American/White punishment gaps. However, the Black/White discipline gap has been studied the most (Ferguson, 2000; Payne & Welch, 2010, 2015; Ramey, 2015; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). My review accordingly emphasizes the Black/White discipline gap.

²See Smolkowski et al. (2016) on recommendations for interventions that would reduce the need for teachers' subjective judgment in office discipline referrals (ODRs).

³I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this issue to my attention.

⁴For examples of interventions that improve teacher-student relations for students across racial groups and disproportionately benefit students of color, see Gregory, Allen, Mikami, Hafen, and Pianta (2014) on *My Teaching Partner* and Okonofua Pauneskau, and Walton (2016) on mindset interventions.

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