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Adolescent Behavioral Challenges Associated with Racial–Ethnic Bias & the Importance of Parental Support

Introduction

By the age of 18, almost half (48.4%) of adolescents experience behavioral issues according to a recent meta-analysis of 192 studies conducted by Dr. Jinjin Yan and his fellow researchers who specialize in adolescent psychology and mental health (Yan et al., 2025). These behaviors can take the form of internalizing behaviors, such as anxiety and depression; externalizing behaviors, such as aggression and rule-breaking; or attention-related difficulties like those seen in ADHD and are all notably more prevalent among adolescents that are racial or ethnic minorities. This inequality highlights underlying systemic racial and ethnic biases that continue to impact the mental health of younger minorities. As the minority population is expected to continue to grow in the U.S., it is crucial to address ongoing interpersonal racial–ethnic discrimination, “unfair treatment because of one’s race/ ethnicity” (Yan et al., 2025), as discrimination has been linked to the prevalence and exacerbation of behavioral issues among adolescents. Specifically, it is important that teachers, peers, and all adults outside of the schoolroom are each creating accepting environments to ensure healthy development among all adolescents, regardless of their background.

Effects of interpersonal racial–ethnic discrimination

Self-fulfilling prophecy is a psychological concept in which the expectations of an individual, either from themselves or others, can influence their behaviors in a way that they fulfill such expectations. In the case of adolescents, interpersonal racial–ethnic discrimination can play a huge part in their self-fulfilling prophecies. For example, discrimination from teachers has been associated with poor academic performance from students and discrimination from peers has been associated with psychological maladjustment. These students may begin to internalize the feeling as though they are not as competent or capable as their peers, which contributes to internalizing behaviors such as anxiety, depression, or low self-esteem. Also, when other students discriminate, adolescents might express certain violent or defiant externalizing behaviors.

Additionally, adolescents can face difficulties with their attention when dealing with discrimination as well. According to Dr. Yan, et.al (2025), adolescents reporting higher levels of racial-ethnic discrimination by their teachers, students, or other adults had more attention problems, similar to those seen in ADHD. These negative psychological effects of ethnoracial bias underscore the pressing need to address this issue and find ways to mitigate its effect on the well-being of youth minorities.

Role of Parental Warmth

While racial and ethnic injustice amongst young adults of minority groups can lead to adverse behavioral outcomes, “parental warmth—the quality of the affectionate bond between parents and children and encompassing support, affection, and nurturance” (Yan et al., 2025) – serves a crucial role in limiting the extent to which their behavior is expressed. As found by the previously mentioned researcher’s metanalysis, minority adolescents experiencing racial-ethnic discrimination that had higher levels of parental warmth showed less externalizing, internalizing, and attention-related behavioral issues when compared to those with low parental warmth. In fact, they even found that adolescents who experienced high level racial-ethnic discrimination but had high levels of parental warmth showed less behavioral problem than those with low levels of discrimination but also low parental warmth (Yan et al., 2025). This shows just how vital of a role having a supportive parental figure is to adolescents’ psychological development and mental wellbeing.

Ultimately, these findings show how powerful parental warmth is, as it serves as a protective factor that can lessen or even take away the behavioral risks associated with racial–ethnic discrimination. Adolescents who have secure relationships with their parents are shown to cope better with discrimination and maintain healthier patterns of behavior.

Conclusion

Adolescents part of minority groups face unique challenges and discrimination that put them at higher risk of developing behavioral issues. Whether their racial-ethnic discrimination comes from their teacher, fellow students, or other adults in their lives, their effects can be expressed in externalized, internalized, or attention-related behaviors, putting them at an emotional or academic disadvantage. However, with parental warmth and intervention, these young adults can surmount the negative behavioral impacts

associated with ethnic and racial injustice and navigate their discrimination more successfully. These findings illuminate the need to continue pressing for equality in the classroom and to encourage the strengthening of family bonds. By addressing this issue, society can help ensure the success of all adolescents, regardless of race or ethnic background.

References:

Yan, J., Jelsma, E., Wang, Y., Zhang, Y., Zhao, Z., Cham, H., Alegria, M., & Yip, T. (2025). Racial–ethnic discrimination and early adolescents’ behavioral problems: The protective role of parental warmth. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 64(2), 249–261. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2024.03.020>