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The contribution of implicit stereotypes to the overrepresentation of African Americans in the special education category of emotional disturbance

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THE CONTRIBUTION OF IMPLICIT STEREOTYPES TO THE OVERREPRESENTATION
OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION CATEGORY OF
EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Psychology

by
Tai A. Collins
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ABSTRACT

The overrepresentation of African Americans in special education is a problem that has plagued the field since its inception, yet very little progress has been made in alleviating the issue. The problem is especially troubling because of the host of negative outcomes associated with special education in general, as well as placing African American students into special education specifically. The current study sought to examine the contribution of implicit racial stereotypes to the overrepresentation problem. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions where they viewed vignettes about either an African American or Caucasian problem student, after which they completed a questionnaire about their willingness to refer the student for special education services and they completed the Implicit Association Test. The results indicated that the two groups did not differ in their referral ratings, and higher implicit stereotype scores as measured by the Implicit Association Test were not associated with higher referral ratings in the African American student condition.

INTRODUCTION

Placement in the special education category of emotional disturbance places a student at greater risk for experiencing negative outcomes both inside and outside of school (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Wagner et al., 2005). More than any other group, African Americans are likely to be disproportionately identified and placed in special education as emotionally disturbed. The problem of African American disproportionality in special education has existed for more than thirty years, but little has been done to alleviate the issue. This is troubling, considering that the phenomenon of African American disproportionality has existed for this long despite being consistently documented and monitored by the Office of Civil Rights (Harry & Anderson, 1994).

Disproportionality refers to the inequality between a group's representation in a certain subgroup and their representation in the general population as a whole. Referring to the special education system, Gravois and Rosenfield state, "disproportionate placement refers to the representation of a particular group of students at a rate different than that found in the general population" (2006, p. 42). The term disproportionality is actually somewhat of a misleading term with regard to African Americans in the special education system. A more correct term is overrepresentation, which occurs when a group comprises a higher percentage of a certain subgroup than it comprises in the general population. .

In order to adequately and productively study the phenomenon of African American overrepresentation in special education, one must be aware of the extent of the problem. Harry and Anderson (1994) cite the *Larry P. et al. v. Wilson Riles et al.* Supreme Court case in 1979 as an early indication of the problem. The Larry P. case revealed that 66% of the then termed educable mentally retarded (EMR) students in a California district were African American, while African Americans only constituted 29% of the population of students. In the state of California

as a whole, 25% of the students classified as EMR at the time were African American, but they represented only 10% of the student population. More recent data shows that African American overrepresentation has been a persistent challenge, especially in the category of emotional disturbance. According to the Data Accountability Center (2009), African Americans comprised 15.07% of all students in the United States in 2007, but they accounted for 20.5% of all special education students. The category of emotional disturbance presents a more sobering picture, as African Americans comprised 28.92% of students identified as emotionally disturbed, while they only accounted for 15.07% of the overall population of students.

The above African American overrepresentation statistics take on alarming significance when considering the negative outcomes associated with entrance into special education. Data collected on the outcomes of students identified as ED indicate that these students have an average GPA of 1.4 and miss roughly 18 days of school per year, which is more than any other group of students. Twenty percent are arrested at least once before leaving school and 50% are arrested within one year of school ending. The incarceration rate for those that drop out is even higher, with 73% of dropouts being arrested within two years. With regard to employment, 68% are unable to get or hold down jobs up to five years after school ending (Wagner et al, 2005; Wagner et al., 2006). The data from the Data Accountability Center (2009) indicate that 32.37% of African Americans receiving special education services dropped out of school during the 2006-2007 school year, compared to only 20.99% of Caucasian students. In terms of graduation rates, 64.3% of Caucasian students in special education graduated high school with a diploma, while only 42.34% of African American special education students completed that task. These statistics show that not only are African Americans overrepresented in special education, but

they are also underserved, as evidenced by lower rates of success when compared to their Caucasian counterparts.

Explanations for Overrepresentation of African Americans

Researchers have debated about and explored various factors that may explain the problem of minority overrepresentation in special education. Gravois and Rosenfield (2006), for example, suggest that there is a disconnect between the cultural beliefs, customs, and behaviors of Caucasian teachers and African American students. Gardner and Miranda (2001) contend that middle-class Caucasian teachers do not receive adequate training concerning how to work in urban schools with minority students. Coutinho, Oswald, and Best posit that “social and demographic factors to consider include poverty, school and community fiscal factors, and access to appropriate general education options” (2002, p. 50). Another common factor cited in the research literature is that the assessment procedures used to place students into special education categories are biased. Gravois and Rosenfield (2006) state that placement tests are not an accurate tool to measure minority students. Gardner and Miranda (2001) suggest that teachers have lower expectations of minority students, which can serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading students to behave consistent with the teachers’ expectations and teachers to refer them for special education. Each of these interpretations may partially explain the problem, but little progress has been made, which suggests that other factors need to be empirically examined in order to alleviate the issue.

Many researchers have posited that African Americans are only overrepresented in the subjective or soft special education categories, such as mild mental retardation and emotional disturbance, rather than more objective categories like hearing or visual impairments (Gardner & Miranda, 2001). Subjective categories require decision-makers to make judgments about when

the severity of the student's problem becomes a "disability," while the categories in which African Americans are not overrepresented have objective, standardized measures that take the subjectivity out of assigning labels. The Data Accountability Center (2009) has released data that support this suggestion in the form of prevalence rates, which are calculated by dividing the number of students of a racial group in a special education category by the total number of students of that racial group in the total population. A prevalence rate of 1.0 suggests that the minority group is equally represented in the particular special education category and the population in general, while a prevalence rate below 1 implies underrepresentation and a prevalence rate greater than 1 implies overrepresentation. In 2007, the prevalence rate for African Americans in the subjective category of emotional disturbance was 1.27, while the Caucasian prevalence rate was 0.6. On the other hand, the prevalence rates for the more objective categories were nearly identical for Caucasians and African Americans. For example, the prevalence rates for the categories of traumatic brain injury and visual impairment were 0.04 for both ethnicities. These data are consistent with the above assertion that African Americans are more likely to be overrepresented in soft categories that require the decision makers to make subjective judgments.

One particularly relevant explanation is that implicit racial stereotypes affect teachers' judgments, leading to higher referral rates under the category of emotional disturbance. Stereotypical thoughts are powerful because, although all people possess them, many people underestimate the extent to which stereotypes affect their behavior. Stereotypes are often latent factors that combine with situational variables and prior experience to determine how people perceive events and react to them. Graham and Lowery (2004) stated that stereotypes are "culturally shared beliefs, both positive and negative, about the characteristics and behaviors of

particular groups” (p.484). The most studied type of stereotype, and the one most pertinent to the current study, is the racial stereotype. Brigham (1971) describes the racial stereotype as “a generalization made about an ethnic group, concerning a trait attribution, which is considered to be unjustified by an observer” (p. 31). Graham and Lowery (2004) suggested that, although personal racial stereotypes held by individuals have been shown to decrease since the Civil Rights Era, stereotypes about African Americans that are held by society have been stable, depicting them as lazy, aggressive, unintelligent, and criminal.

Graham and Lowery (2004) explain that the original view of stereotypes asserted that they were completely under people’s conscious awareness, but the growing research literature has reflected that implicit, unconscious stereotypes affect behavior as well. The automatic nature of stereotypes has been demonstrated, as people have been shown to automatically associate positive traits with their ingroup and negative traits to outgroups (Dasgupta, 2004). Graham and Lowery (2004) describe unconscious stereotypes as “*unintentional* because they are not planned responses; *involuntary*, because they occur automatically in the presence of an environmental cue; and *effortless*, in that they do not deplete an individual’s limited information processing resources” (p. 285).

Coutinho, Oswald, and Best expressed a “concern that public education embodies cultural biases that incorrectly and disproportionately target minority students during the referral, assessment, and eligibility process” (2002, p. 50). Additional researchers have intimated that biases, whether racial, linguistic, or cultural, directly affect the referral and placement of students into special education (Articles & Trent, 1994; Harry & Anderson, 1994). Abidin and Robinson (2002) suggest, “Research on the referral-to-placement process suggests that teachers’ opinions are extremely important in determining eligibility for special education services” (p. 205). Given

the central role of teachers' judgments in the special education decision-making process and the fact that a person's judgments can be affected by implicit stereotypes, there is a need for research to examine the contribution of implicit stereotypes to the referral of African Americans for special education as emotionally disturbed.

Although many researchers have speculated as to the effect of stereotypes on African American overrepresentation in special education, very few experimental studies have been conducted to examine the effect. Moreover, the studies that have attempted to quantify the effect of stereotypes on referral and placement have garnered conflicting results. Bahr, Fuchs, Stecher, and Fuchs (1991) found that both African American and Caucasian teachers rated African American students as more appropriate for special education than Caucasian students; however, other researchers have found no effect of race on teacher perceptions of student behavior, including referral of students to special education (Chang & Sue, 2003; Abidin & Robinson, 2002; Tobias, Zibrin, & Menell, 1983). Tobias, Cole, Zibrin, and Bodlakova (1982) found no main effects of student or teacher race on referral into special education, but they did find an interaction, which showed that teachers were more likely to refer a student for special education if the student was of a different ethnicity than the teacher. This study solidifies the argument that it is not simply the race of the student or teacher that affects the rate of referral into special education; rather, the implicit stereotypes harbored by the judgment-maker more directly affect the referral rates. However, a subsequent replication of the aforementioned study failed to find the same significant interaction (Tobias, Zibrin, & Menell, 1983), which highlights the need for more rigorous experimental research to shed light on the topic. Researchers have shown that priming therapists, as well as police officers and juvenile probation officers, about racial stereotypes leads to increased punitive and expected recidivism ratings (Abreu, 1999; Graham &

Lowery, 2004). If implicit racial stereotypes affect the judgments of professionals in those fields, then teachers are not exempt from the effects of implicit stereotypes and African American students may be unjustly referred and placed into special education as a function of their skin color.

Purpose of the Current Study

The purpose of the proposed study is to examine empirically the contribution of implicit racial stereotypes to the overrepresentation of African American in the special education category of emotional disturbance. There are three main research inquiries that will guide this study:

1. To what extent will participants randomly assigned to an African American male student vignette provide higher ratings on items assessing punitive disciplinary practices, referral for special education, special education identification as emotionally disturbed, and need for placement in a restrictive setting than participants assigned to a Caucasian male student vignette?
2. To what extent will implicit racial stereotypes be significantly correlated with ratings on questionnaire items assessing punitive disciplinary practices, referral for special education, special education identification as emotionally disturbed, and need for placement in a restrictive setting for those who are exposed to the Black male student vignette?
3. To what extent will the race of the participant moderate the magnitude of the effect between implicit racial stereotypes and participant ratings?

In light of the research demonstrating the tendency for individuals to view African American males as threatening and hostile (Graham & Lowery, 2004), the first hypothesis is that participants in the African American student group will be more likely to endorse ratings

indicating the need to refer the African-American child for special education services than participants rating the Caucasian student. Also, participants in the African American group are expected to provide ratings indicating need for harsher punishment, special education identification, and restrictive setting placement than participants in the Caucasian student group.

The hypothesis related to the second research inquiry is that teachers' implicit stereotype scores, as measured by the Implicit Association Test (IAT), will have an interactive effect with vignette group. Specifically, it is anticipated that the effect of implicit stereotypes on the expected referral, placement, and recidivism ratings will be inconsequential for participants exposed to the Caucasian male student vignette; however, there will be a significant difference in these ratings for the group of participants who are exposed to the African American male student vignette. Within the African American vignette group, participants that have higher IAT scores are expected to provide harsher expected referral, placement, and recidivism ratings than their counterparts with lower IAT scores.

The final hypothesis guiding the current research is that the race of the participants will not moderate the effect of implicit stereotypes on the referral, identification, placement, and punishment ratings. This hypothesis finds much credence in the conflicting results of previous studies (e.g. Tobias et. al, 1982; Tobias et. al, 1983). The participants' race is expected to show a negligible interactive effect, especially when the variance associated with implicit stereotypes is accounted for. As participants of all races are exposed to the same stereotypical images in the media, it is expected that the participants' race will not affect their ratings; however, their level of implicit stereotype association, regardless of their race, is expected to be the most significant factor in this exploration.

METHOD

Participants

The participants for the current study were students at Louisiana State University and Southern University who were on track to become a teacher or actively in a teacher preparation program. Students enrolled in educational psychology classes, as well as other education majors, were sought out for participation in the study. A power analysis indicated that 128 participants were needed to operate at .80 power in order to detect a moderate effect at $p < .05$. 139 students participated in the study, the majority of whom were female (89.9%), Caucasian (90.6%), and had less than one year of experience in schools (89.2%). The sample consisted of 5% freshmen, 44.6% sophomores, 21.6% juniors, 23% seniors, and 5.8% graduate students. 79.9% of participants were education majors, while the remainder of participants were psychology majors.

Procedure

Students were sent an e-mail soliciting their participation in the study. The e-mail contained a link to a website, where they first provided informed consent in order to participate in the study. Next, participants read a vignette about a problem student (see Appendix A). The manipulation for the proposed study involved random assignment into groups based on the race of the child in the vignette. One group of participants read a vignette about a Caucasian male student, while participants in the other group encountered an African American male student. All other aspects of the vignettes were identical to control for the untoward influence of nuisance variables. After reading the vignette, the participants were shown a questionnaire that gathered demographic information, as well as questions related to referral, identification, placement, and ability to thrive in the general education setting (see Appendix B). After the questionnaire was administered, the participants completed an African American-Caucasian version of the Implicit Association Test. The IAT was presented after the vignette and questionnaire in order to avoid

any expectancy effects that might have occurred if participants were exposed to the racial pictures on the IAT before responding to the questionnaire. Following the completion of the IAT task, participants were presented with a debriefing screen where they were thanked for their participation.

Measures

Implicit Association Test. The Implicit Association Test is a tool that can be used to measure unconscious stereotypes that participants would probably attempt to hide (Greenwald et al., 1998). During the test, participants were presented with words and pictures that they were asked to classify into ‘pleasant’ and ‘unpleasant’ groups. Next, participants were shown African American and Caucasian faces, and they sorted the faces into groups based on race. In the final stage of the test, the two previous tasks were merged, so that participants placed items and faces into pleasant, unpleasant, African American and Caucasian categories. During the schema consistent trials, participants pressed the same button on the keyboard to categorize Caucasian and pleasant items, and a different button to categorize African American and unpleasant items. The schema inconsistent trials required participants to use the same key to place items into African American and pleasant groups, while another key was used for unpleasant and Caucasian items. The IAT measures the strength of implicit associations based on the reaction times to the schema consistent and schema inconsistent trials. For example, a person’s score on the IAT would suggest a higher degree of implicit stereotypes if they took considerably longer to sort African American and pleasant stimuli on the same key (schema inconsistent), as opposed to Caucasian and pleasant stimuli (schema consistent). The statistic that the IAT software reports is an effect size in the form of a *d* score, which is the difference in reaction times in response to the schema consistent and inconsistent trials divided by the pooled standard deviation of the

participants' response latencies (Greenwald et al., 1998). The IAT has been shown to be a valid and reliable measure of implicit stereotypes (Greenwald et al., 2006).

Questionnaire. The questionnaire first gathered information about age, ethnicity, gender, experience in schools, major, and classification (see Appendix B). Participants then answered six questions pertaining to referral for special education as emotionally disturbed, punishment, special education identification, placement in a restrictive setting, and the extent to which the student's problem behaviors can be effectively changed in the general education setting. A six-point Likert scale was used so that participants were not able to respond in a neutral manner.

Data Analysis. A Total score was created by adding the participants' responses to the six dependent variable questions. Because the question concerning the student's potential behavior change was asked in a positive manner, the responses to this question were reverse scored in order to be comparable to the responses to the other five questions. To assess whether there was a significant difference between the responses of participants in the Caucasian group and the African American group, an independent samples t-test was run using the vignette condition as the independent variable and the total score as the dependent variable. Six follow-up t-tests were also run on each of the component dependent variables that comprised the total score. Also, a one-way between subjects multiple analysis of variance was conducted with the condition as the independent variable and the total scores, as well as the responses to each of the six questions as the dependent variables.

RESULTS

The results of an independent samples t-test with the problem student's race as the independent variable and the total score as the dependent variable were not statistically significant, $t(137)=-.794$, $p=.429$. Similarly, t-tests between the problem student's race and each of the six variables comprising the total score all resulted in statistically insignificant findings. The average total score for participants in the Caucasian problem student group was 20.6 (SD=4.29), while the average for participants in the African American problem student group was 21.1 (SD=3.65). A one-way between subjects multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) was run, with the race of the problem student as the independent variable and the responses to the six dependent variables, as well as the total score, as the dependent variables. Consistent with the t-test results, none of the relationships observed in the MANOVA reached statistical significance. Significant results were also not obtained when ethnicity was entered as a covariate. Also, the d score associated with the participants' IAT scores was not significantly correlated with their total scores in response to the six questions ($r=.001$, $p=.995$).

DISCUSSION

The current study examined the effect of altering the race of a problem student in a vignette on participants' ratings of the likelihood that they would engage in discipline practices such as referral to the office, referral for special education, placement in restrictive settings, etc. Also, implicit stereotypes in the form of scores on the Implicit Association Test were examined as a possible factor in the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education as emotionally disturbed. The results did not provide evidence in support of the hypotheses of the study, as participants' responses in the African American and Caucasian problem student groups were not statistically different, although the responses of the African American group were slightly higher than the Caucasian group. Also, the participants' implicit stereotypes, as measured by the IAT, did not constitute a significant contribution to the model. As such, the current study is exemplary of the inconsistent research base concerning the effects of race on the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education.

Some limitations of the current study are of merit, and may help to explain the statistically insignificant results that were obtained. First, the nature of the independent variable, in the form of stating the race of the problem student in the vignette, may not have been sufficiently salient to prime the participants' racial stereotypes. However, individuals who completed the study while it was being piloted were able to identify the race of the problem student in the vignette after they completed the study, so the salience of the race manipulation is unclear. Second, the presentation of a vignette about a problem student is an analog condition that may not sufficiently replicate the experience of being exposed to a student's problem behaviors in an actual classroom for an extended period of time. As such, the participants' responses may not have been an accurate representation of what their actual behavior would be if they experienced

the situation described in the vignette. Third, the participants were mostly undergraduate students and almost 90% of participants had less than one year of experience in schools; therefore, the sample obtained in this study may not be representative of actual teachers with years of experience in schools. Finally, the study consisted of about 90% Caucasians, and a more ethnically diverse sample may have been advantageous.

Although the current study did not demonstrate that student race and implicit stereotypes are significant factors in the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education as emotionally disturbed, more research should be done to further elucidate the contributions of these and other factors to the long-standing problem. Future research should include more salient methods of identifying the race of the problem student, such as including a picture of the student and/or stating the student's race multiple times. Also, the samples of future studies should include actual teachers with more school experience than the undergraduates recruited for the current study. Another line of research that may have considerable promise involves priming participants with either African American or race-neutral stimuli before presenting them with a vignette about a problem student of unidentified race. This type of study would provide a clearer picture of the effects of student race on referral ratings. Finally, future research should examine the effects of race on referral ratings in combination with the effects of other variables, such as socioeconomic status (SES) and parental involvement. This line of research is especially important and should be continued, as the factors influencing the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education as emotionally disturbed should be empirically examined and demonstrated, and potential solutions to the problem should be developed and tested.

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APPENDIX A: STUDENT VIGNETTE

Instructions:

Imagine you a 4th Grade teacher and you have 30 students in your class. Read the following vignette on one of your students and answer the questions below as honestly as possible.

In your 4th Grade class, you are experiencing difficulty with a 10 year-old (Caucasian or African American) male. He comes from a troubling home environment. His mother is a single parent who works two jobs and is raising three children. Academically, he is performing below grade level in both reading and math. The biggest challenge you are having with him, however, is not his academics, but rather his behavior. Despite having a few friends, he has trouble making and keeping new friends. In class, he can be disruptive to the learning environment because he speaks out of turn, gets out of his seat without asking, and distracts other students while they attempt to participate in classroom activities. He also challenges your authority by engaging in oppositional and defiant behaviors. These oppositional and defiant behaviors consist of him raising his voice to you, ignoring your instructions, and arguing with you when he is told “no.” Outside of the classroom, he tends to act aggressively toward his peers on the playground. He is often involved in confrontations with peers because of teasing that results with someone getting his or her feelings hurt. His behavioral difficulties have been persistent throughout the year, and records indicate that he has had similar problems in the past.

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE

1. **Age:** (participants manually submitted their age)
2. **Race/Ethnicity:** Caucasian(non-Hispanic) African American (non-Hispanic)
Hispanic Asian American Indian/Alaskan Native Other
3. **Sex:** Male Female
4. **Classification:** Freshman/1st Year Sophomore/2nd Year Junior/3rd Year Senior/4th Year Graduate Student
5. **Major:** Elementary Education Pre-K-3 Education Higher Education Secondary Education Special Education Homes Program Psychology
6. **Experience in Schools:** Less than 1 school year 1-2 school years 2-3 school years 3-4 school years More than 4 school years

7. To what extent do you think the student should be referred to the office for his behaviors?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Definitely Not	No	Probably No	Probably Yes	Yes	Definitely Yes

8. To what extent do you think this student should be suspended if the behaviors continue?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Definitely Not	No	Probably No	Probably Yes	Yes	Definitely Yes

9. How likely would you be to refer the student for special education services if the behavior persisted?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Somewhat Unlikely	Somewhat Likely	Likely	Very Likely

10. Given the student's behaviors, how likely is it that the student would qualify for special education services under the category of emotional disturbance?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Somewhat Unlikely	Somewhat Likely	Likely	Very Likely

11. To what extent do you think this student will eventually need to be placed in a restrictive educational environment so his behaviors do not interfere with and negatively impact other students' ability to learn?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Definitely Not	No	Probably No	Probably Yes	Yes	Definitely Yes

12. How likely do you think it is that the student's problem behaviors can be effectively changed in the general education classroom with basic behavior support strategies?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Somewhat Unlikely	Somewhat Likely	Likely	Very Likely

VITA

Tai A. Collins was born in November, 1986 in New Orleans, Louisiana, where he was also raised. He obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology at Loyola University New Orleans in 2008. Subsequently, he moved to Baton Rouge in order to pursue a doctorate in school psychology at Louisiana State University.