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Eleanor D. Brown

West Chester University of Pennsylvania, ebrown@wcupa.edu

Mallory L. Garnett

West Chester University of Pennsylvania

Lauren Burlew

West Chester University of Pennsylvania

Peter Ippolito

West Chester University of Pennsylvania

Julie Belling

West Chester University of Pennsylvania

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Eleanor D. Brown, Mallory L. Garnett, Lauren Burlew, Peter Ippolito, Julie Belling, Masataka Mitsuzuka, and Anna Di Stefano

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Eleanor D. Brown, Mallory L. Garnett, Lauren Burlew, Peter Ippolito, Julie Belling, Masataka Mitsuzuka, Anna Di Stefano

West Chester University of Pennsylvania

Background

In the United States, Boys of Color face multiple risks to healthy academic and socio-emotional functioning. These risks relate to the intersection of male gender with minority racial/ethnic group membership, and correlated interpersonal, socio-cultural, and structural oppression. Boys of Color are disproportionately likely to grow up in families of low socioeconomic status (SES). Boys of Color also face negative stereotyping and biased judgments. The present study asks: Does information about race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status bias ratings of boys' behavior?

Past research suggests that stereotypes have the greatest impact on judgments of an individual when observers have brief or non-comprehensive exposure to that individual. Concomitantly, clinicians and others in positions of authority often rely on brief observations for making judgments about child behavior. The present study examines the impact of information about race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status (SES) on observer ratings of boys' behavior based on brief observations.



Method

The participants were 288 college students enrolled in a psychology course at a public university, and 71.3% identified as female, 28.7% as male, 76.0% as Caucasian/European American, 16.7% as African American, 2.6% as Hispanic/Latino American, 4.7% as Asian American, 84.0% as having been raised middle SES, 16.0% as low SES, and 59.3% as holding past or present employment working with children.

Participants were randomly assigned to view one of six video clips focused on different children who were all male, of varied racial/ethnic backgrounds, and displaying similar levels of problem behavior as rated by experts using a validated coding system. Participants were randomly assigned to receive cues indicating the target child was of low or middle SES. After viewing the clips, participants completed ratings on a well validated measure of child behavior, the Conners' Teacher Rating Scale-Revised, as well as a manipulation check, and then were debriefed as to the purpose of the study.

Results and Discussion

Results of a multivariate analysis of covariance controlling for rater race/ethnicity and SES indicated statistically significant differences in ratings of boys' behavior based on their race/ethnicity ($F(5, 282) = 4.29$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$, $p = .039$) and perceived SES ($F(5, 282) = 7.68$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$, $p = .006$). Ratings of problem behavior were higher for boys who were of Color ($M = 61.07$, $SE = .57$, $n = 157$) compared with White ($M = 59.27$, $SE = .64$, $n = 131$) and for those perceived to be of low ($M = 61.39$, $SE = .66$, $n = 122$) versus middle SES ($M = 58.96$, $SD = .56$, $n = 166$). The interaction between race/ethnicity and SES was not significant ($F(5, 282) = .11$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$, $p = .747$).

Results suggest information about SES and race/ethnicity biases ratings of boys' behavior. Implications concern reducing the impact of negative stereotypes on Boys of Color, and promoting accurate judgments about child behavior and mental health functioning.



Contact: Eleanor Brown Ph.D.
Department of Psychology
West Chester University of Pennsylvania
ebrown@wcupa.edu 610-436-3153