

# Effects of racial and ethnic stereotypes on school experience of racial minorities

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**Abstract.** As schools in the United States are becoming more diverse, there is an increasing awareness of student's mental health. Stereotypes and biases are big factors that influence school life for minority student groups. While some biases might seem harmless, they may increase the risk for students to experience anxiety, stress, or depression. With regard to school experience and mental health, much research focused on bullying, verbal violence, teacher expectations, and peer expectations towards racial and ethnic minorities. This review examines different aspects of interpersonal interactions for racial minorities to understand the effects of stereotypes in the learning environment. Teachers and student peers are found to hold stereotypical beliefs intentionally and unintentionally, which imposes outside stress on the students, potentially leading to mental health problems and shaping students' lives. The negative effects of racial and ethnic stereotypes on minorities put forth a need for stronger awareness to prevent prejudiced judgments. Schools and teachers should pay close attention to their behaviors and how they affect minority students, as well as regulate verbal and physical victimizations regarding race and ethnicity.

## 1 Introduction

Stereotype biases have been a widespread phenomenon in everyday life. People form prejudice and assort certain individuals with conceptual qualities of a certain group [1]. Evaluating others with stereotypes is a complicated social behavior and may potentially lead to many complications. In particular, stereotypes regarding race and ethnicity are of great significance as they affect many Western or internationalized countries. In America, for example, 5 instances of discrimination towards black adolescents happen every day, and other minority groups are often the targets of peer victimization [2] (see Table 1). These stereotypes and biases lead to mental health problems in a school environment, such as trauma, stress, depression, or anxiety.

Raising awareness about the racial and ethnic stereotype biases in the learning environment is important because experiences in school may shape children and adolescents' essential beliefs, characters, and behaviors. While some stereotypes like the model minority myth might seem harmless, it is crucial to understand them as they may lead to consequences such as declines of mental state and academic performance.

This review examines the effects of race and ethnicity on the lives of children and adolescents in the learning environment. Different from other studies that only cover one aspect of interpersonal relationships in school, it will look at racial and ethnic biases between victims, student peers, and teachers. This review also aims to provide a holistic understanding of stereotypical

biased situations in the minority student body, analyze future trends, and come up with suggestions to minimize the negative effects of racial bias.

## 2 Definitions

### 2.1 Race and ethnicity

Race is a way to categorize groups of people according to their skin color and appearance. People associate themselves with different races in different parts of the world. While race is defined by physical appearance, ethnicity is shared by people with the same background. This may include cultural background, language spoken, identity, and ancestry. Although identification based on race and ethnicity is only a way to categorize people and intends no discrimination, it has caused widespread segregation in many schools in the international setting [3].

Much research does not distinguish the difference between race and ethnicity, and some stereotypes might assume one's background according to one's race. However, a person with a certain race might not share the same ethnicity as others within the same racial group, and vice versa.

In this review, ethnic assumptions and stereotypes based on race will be examined. The review will not examine personal physical appearance as it would deviate the focus of race and ethnicity to personal remarks. Instead, ethnic assumptions and discrimination

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made to a group of student's learning experience will be the focus of this review.

## 2.2 Bullying and peer victimization

Bullying is when a negative action is repeatedly and intentionally done to a person, and it could lead to mental health problems like depression [3]. In a wider context, widespread bullying in schools is an ongoing problem in the USA, provoking racial and ethnic segregation for youth. Peer victimization is very similar to bullying and is sometimes mistaken with the same meaning, but peer victimization may be unintentional actions. It is an aggressive behavior done by others to harm a student mentally or physically [4].

While this review examines both bullying and peer victimization, it focuses mainly on the cause and effect of peer victimization as it can be applied to a broader variety of situations than bullying.

## 2.3 Stereotypes

Stereotypes are encodings of concepts, personal beliefs, and social norms about a certain group that cause biased impressions to form. While stereotypes that emphasize a certain group of people for their physical or cognitive abilities are not explicit and might not be harmful, they can still induce negative effects on a person's mental health [1].

Studies in this review cover both hostile and implicit stereotypes towards a certain race or ethnicity. In a school setting, hostile and explicit stereotypes include discrimination and verbal abuse, while the implicit stereotypes include the model minority myth [5].

## 2.4 School composition

There has been an ongoing increase in racial and ethnic diversity in public elementary and secondary schools. For example, between the fall of 2010 and 2021, the percentage of students who are Hispanic, Asian, and of two or more races increased significantly [6]. The diverse races in American schools include Asian, African, Native Indian, Pacific Islanders, and white in the USA, with some people of color in the community as first or second-generation immigrants. This increase in the diversity of languages, races, and cultures in schools is associated with the percentage of peer victimization [7].

## 3 Peer victimization

Because of the diverse ethnicity in schools, peer victimization is widespread in the United States. Studies have found that stereotypes regarding cultural background, language spoken, and socioeconomic status are indicators of whether one is the target of school

bullying. In a mixed-race setting, students tend to separate themselves by these smaller factors, leading to groups within a community and a reason for bullying. Students tend to evaluate their in-groups positively, hence developing dislike and discrimination for out-groups according to social identity theory [4]. In these groups, the minority group is the one that is more likely to be targeted for bullying. In the USA, for example, the majority group are white Americans, and the minority are Asian, Latino, and black Americans [3].

## 3.1 Conformity to stereotypes

This section will examine victims who are not being "whitewashed"—behaving or associating with the majority group.

### 3.1.1 Linguistic violence

One of the most significant differences between the majority and minority groups is the language spoken. While some students of the minority race groups are fluent in the majority language, others have language barriers, and bullies of the majority group use these language barriers as a factor for discrimination. In a study conducted on middle school bilingual Latino Americans in Texas, researcher Ayala confirmed the presence of micro-aggressions and linguistic violence in diverse classroom settings. The study took a qualitative approach in classroom observations examining bilingual students' perspectives on speaking Spanish. In the dialogues analyzed in the study, the focal students described experiences when they were asked to stop speaking their native language or were asked to "Go back to Mexico." [8]. The students received micro-aggressions like this from both their teachers and fellow students, which diminishes the validity of their native tongue. This may cause a loss in the minority language in a majority setting as the students in the study refused to speak their native tongue after being criticized [8]. The study has a limitation because results are collected through observation and self-reports.

This study shows the effects of racial stereotypes and how classroom environments can expose children and adolescents to linguistic violence at a young age. The students may face bullying from peers and prejudice from teachers only as a result of their native tongue. These micro-aggression acts may lead to trauma time after time, even if students at a young age might not understand hostility in a wider context. Another study on race and bullying shows that Black and Hispanic youth, including all genders, are more likely to experience Identity Based Bullying, perpetration, and racial bullying in school properties [2]. The problem of linguistic violence poses a challenge in racial and linguistic embracement, and it urges for a solution in the education system.

**Table 1.** Prevalence of IBB by Demographics and Intersectional Identities [2]

Characteristic <sup>a</sup>	Youth, No. (%) (n = 3939) <sup>b</sup>	
	Experiences	Perpetration
Race		
Non-Hispanic		
White	441 (32.9)	222 (18.8)
Black	511 (37.0)	396 (30.1)
Hispanic	155 (43.3)	109 (33.1)
Multiracial/other	327 (44.9)	187 (28.9)

Note.<sup>a</sup>Percentages in this table are calculated based on the total number of youth in a row. For example, among non-Hispanic White youth, 441 (32.9%) endorsed experiences of IBB. <sup>b</sup>Experiences of IBB were coded as a binary; youth received a score of 1 if they answered affirmatively to experiences of bullying based on race/ethnicity/ national origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, physical or mental disability, immigration status, and/or another unspecified reason. They received a score of 0 if they denied experiences of bullying for all social identities. A similar approach was adopted for IBB perpetration, which was also coded as a binary but relied on responses to questions querying IBB perpetration based on each of the 7 aforementioned reasons.

### 3.1.2 Immigrant victimization

A study conducted by Arens and colleagues examined whether there is a higher risk of victimization for immigrant students in Germany. These include students who have a different nationality, language spoken, or gender. Similar to the USA, Germany also faced an increase in the number of students with an immigrant or international background. The study uses a Latent Profile Analysis, a person-centered approach, to examine peer victimizations of immigrants from the perspectives of each individual racial subgroup. A sample of 50,000 families are randomly selected to complete the adapted version of the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire, the student version of a Screen for Child Anxiety Related Emotional Disorders, a Children’s Depressions Screener, a parent screener, and an adapted version of the Self Description Questionnaire [4].

Using a Bootstrap-Likelihood-Ratio-Test, the participants were sorted into three profiles of different extents of victimization: not experiencing any, experiencing personal victimization, or experiencing personal and ethnic victimization. The results have found that immigrants are more likely to be in the profile with the most victimization. From the results of the earlier questionnaires, it has been found that students who are victims of bullying in a school setting experience a greater risk of depression, anxiety, and panic disorders compared to non-victims [4].

Overall, the study found that immigrants who either have a difference in nationality or have language barriers are more likely to be targeted for bullying. This is because students are being grouped and targeted regarding to race, identity, and language spoken. Although the result of this study provides many insights into the relationship between a student’s background and bullying, a reason that caused setbacks in accuracy is that the questionnaires are self-reported by the participants.

### 3.2 Dis-conformity to stereotypes

While it might be counterintuitive, individuals who do not conform to stereotypes associated with their particular race are more likely to be victimized by school

bullying. The students are often seen as acting like their white peers. For example, an Asian American who does not excel academically, an African American who’s not athletic, or a Latino American who is active in extracurricular activities will be bullied. Not only do the white peers bully the students who do not conform to the stereotype, but peers within the same in-group also accuse students who are acting accordingly to the majority group [3].

## 4 Teacher expectations and academic performance

In Western schools, some teachers have different academic expectations for students of different races. Similar to teachers, the students also internalize different performances of certain groups of people. It is a widespread stereotype to assume the same achievement levels for people of the same race, and that may cause stress, disorders, suicidal thoughts, and a weakening of academic performance [5]. In addition, the academic achievement gap is further emphasized by these stereotypes and may affect a student’s achievement in future environments [9].

### 4.1 Higher expectations and the model minority myth

The model minority myth is the myth that associates certain positive characteristics with the minority in the group. For example, Asian students in America are hardworking and better performing compared to students of the majority group. Although the myth is assigning positive attributes to a group, it has numerous negative effects on the students. A study by Ang conducted using the AESI, Academic Expectation Stress Inventory, shows that Asian student’s primary stress stems from academic performance [10].

Students in the minority group might feel an obligation to conform to the stereotype and meet the higher expectations that others have on them. Those who are not high achieving might feel stressed, have worse performances, and not have a sense of belonging to their own racial or ethnic group. Asian Americans might experience stress imposed by parents and teachers when

they don't perform as well. A study by Atkin and colleagues found an association between school composition and stress from the model minority myth with a demographic questionnaire, Internalization of Model Minority method, and a Depression Anxiety Stress Scale. The study shows that students internalized the model minority myth less in schools predominant with their own race compared to students who are the minority. In addition, the internalization resulted in more mental health problems [5].

In STEM courses, faculties tend to assume "brilliance" with certain students and have a fixed mindset about it. Faculties would think that students of certain racial or ethnic group will have fixed abilities to perform in the STEM course [11]. A study has found that the fixed mindsets of the faculties cause a larger racial performance gap in the students [11].

#### 4.2 Lower expectations due to racial factors

Not only do teachers and students expect certain racial or ethnic groups to have a higher academic performance, but they also hold the belief that certain other groups are not high achieving, thus giving them a lower expectation in the learning environment. Some minority groups are usually inaccurately associated with having worse intellectual abilities, understanding of course materials, and athletic performances due to language barriers and racial stereotypes. As an example, teachers and students are likely to assume that African American student-athletes will have lower academic performances [12].

In a study conducted in Germany, Lorenz and colleagues surveyed teachers in elementary schools regarding their perceptions and expectations of Turkish students. This study provides a situation similar to that of minority students learning in America. Lorenz collected data with ratings of students on a scale of 11 at the start of the school year, when teacher bias towards the students may not have formed or affected the students. Language level, student achievements, and motivation are then measured. The same steps are then repeated at the end of the school year. Using a multilevel regression analysis, Lorenz concluded that teachers had lower expectations in every aspect for minority students at the start of the school year compared to European students. In addition, teachers with negative stereotypes accurately predicted students' reading and math abilities for the end of the school year, which is a result of self-fulfilling prophecies. Although the study did not take into account the initial abilities of students and assumed teachers' judgments are solely based on race and ethnicity, it showed that teacher expectations regarding race and ethnicity might have negative effects on students [9].

#### 5 Conclusion

This review provides insights on how race and ethnicity play significant roles in one's learning experience with respect to both peer and teacher interactions. Unlike other papers that only look at one aspect of a student's

life, this review is a holistic representation of situations that minority students face in a majority learning environment. No matter whether the students conform to stereotypical impressions or not, they experience negative outcomes such as peer victimization, linguistic violence, loss of culture, and biased expectations. These factors are potential threats to students' mental health as they induce stress, anxiety, or depression. Biases according to race and ethnicity may affect students' educational trajectory, thus influencing their mindsets, core beliefs, decisions, and emotional states in the future. Overall, intentional and unintentional biases in the education system will influence the minds of the next generation, proliferating problems such as discrimination, social stigma, and injustice.

With these potential negative outcomes of stereotypes towards minority students and society, there is an urgent need for the prevention of injustice in the school environment. Improvements in the education system can be made to provide teachers with a better understanding of stereotypes, thus sooner preventions of bullying or teacher bias. Future research shall explore more on the relationships between bias in education and bias in careers, as well as the long-term effects of racial and ethnic stereotypes.

Limitations to this review include that the data and examples provided can only be generalized to elementary and middle schools in certain cities and countries that the studies were conducted in. Many studies in this review also assumed that negative phenomena such as peer victimization are solely caused by differences in race and ethnicity.

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