

Two Strikes: Race and the Disciplining of Young Students

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Abstract

There are large racial disparities in school discipline in the United States, which, for Black students, not only contribute to school failure but also can lay a path toward incarceration. Although the disparities have been well documented, the psychological mechanisms underlying them are unclear. In two experiments, we tested the hypothesis that such disparities are, in part, driven by racial stereotypes that can lead teachers to escalate their negative responses to Black students over the course of multiple interpersonal (e.g., teacher-to-student) encounters. More generally, we argue that race not only can influence how perceivers interpret a specific behavior, but also can enhance perceivers' detection of behavioral patterns across time. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and practical benefits of employing this novel approach to stereotyping across a range of real-world settings.

Keywords

stereotyping, racial disparities, school discipline

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There are large racial disparities in disciplinary practices in schools across the United States. In a recent national survey of more than 70,000 schools, for example, the Office for Civil Rights (2012) reports that Black students are more than three times as likely to be suspended or expelled as their White peers, a fact not fully explained by racial differences in socioeconomic status or in student misbehavior (Fenning & Rose, 2007; see also McFadden, Marsh, Price, & Hwang, 1992; Shaw & Braden, 1990; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982). Racial disparities in discipline are particularly problematic because they contribute to the racial-achievement gap (Townsend, 2000; see also Garibaldi, Blanchard, & Brooks, 1996), increase the likelihood that Black students will drop out of school (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Finn, 1989), and may then increase the probability that such youths will be incarcerated (Balfanz, Spiridakis, Neild, & Legters, 2003; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Wald & Losen, 2003; Western, 2006). Surprisingly, despite the size of discipline disparities and the severity of their consequences, little experimental research has been conducted to investigate the psychological processes that contribute to those disparities.

In two controlled experiments, we examined how student race may influence teachers' responses to classroom misbehavior. We proposed that teachers would experience repeated infractions as more severe and disturbing if those infractions were committed by a Black student rather than a White student, and that this ultimately leads to harsher disciplinary responses for Black students. We argue that negative racial stereotypes associated with Black students make it more likely that teachers will view infractions over time as a problematic pattern. The first infraction informs how the second infraction should be read—heightening teachers' concerns and escalating harsh disciplinary treatment. Indeed, a primary function of stereotyping processes more generally may be to heighten perceivers' sensitivity to potential behavioral patterns across time. We examined this possibility experimentally for the first time and in the schooling context.

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Typically, stereotyping researchers conduct cross-sectional, laboratory studies that require participants to offer a judgment about a given target who is otherwise a stranger. However, in everyday settings, many interpersonal relationships involve well-known social partners and unfold over time (e.g., Shelton & Richeson, 2006). Teacher-student relationships, for example, rarely involve a single encounter. In fact, teachers may respond most negatively to students after they have had multiple, negative student encounters—instances from which patterns can be assessed. It is when a student chronically—as opposed to spontaneously—fails to reach teachers' expectations that those teachers show an increased likelihood to respond punitively and with retribution (Reyna & Weiner, 2001; Weiner, Graham, & Reyna, 1997).

Teachers may be especially likely to respond harshly to a Black student misbehaving over time, compared with a White student, because Black students are frequently stereotyped as troublemakers in school contexts. Research shows that teachers commonly perceive Black students to have more negative demeanors, to have a longer history of misbehavior, and to earn lower grades than White students do (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). Other research shows that the label "troublemaker" is based on teacher assessments of the same student characteristics: demeanor, previous misbehavior, and academic performance (McCarthy & Hoge, 1987). Taken together, to the extent that Black students are viewed as troublemakers, isolated infractions across time may more readily signal a pattern for Black students than for White students. Even different types of infractions may be grouped together, understood as "repeated" misbehavior, and seen as indicators of the same underlying characteristic—this student is prone to make trouble.

The current research tested this possibility in two online, experimental studies. In both studies, we showed practicing teachers the records of a Black or a White student who misbehaved twice, and we measured teachers' responses from one infraction to the other. In both studies, we asked teachers to report how troubled they would feel as a consequence of the student's misbehavior and how severely they would want to discipline the student. In Study 2, we also asked teachers to report on the likelihood that they would suspend the student in the future. Finally, we compared our findings with national statistics on school suspensions in the United States.

Study 1

Minor infractions (e.g., for insubordination or class disruption) are the most frequently reported reasons for referring students to the principal's office (Lewis, Butler, Bonner, & Joubert, 2010; McFadden et al., 1992; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997)

and are more common reasons for referring Black than White students to the office (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba et al., 2002). We designed an experimental study to examine the influence of student race on teachers' responses to minor infractions. We predicted that after just two minor infractions, a misbehaving Black student (compared with a misbehaving White student) would lead teachers to feel more troubled, and they would wish to discipline the Black student more harshly.

Method

Participants and design. We recruited 57 female kindergarten-through-12th-grade (K–12) teachers (average experience: 14 years; average class size: 26; average age: 42 years; 38 White, 2 Black, 1 Asian, and 16 unknown) from the Web sites of school districts across the country (for more information, see the Supplemental Material available online). The study had a 2 (student race: Black vs. White) \times 2 (number of infractions: one vs. two) mixed design, with the number of infractions serving as the within-subjects factor. We recruited teachers while they were still actively teaching and interacting with students. Because we conducted the study during the last month of the academic school year, our data-collection aims were modest—to collect data from at least 50 teachers (25 per cell). We stopped data collection at the end of the academic year when we reached this target.

Procedure and stimuli. Teachers were shown a picture of a middle school and asked to imagine themselves as a teacher there. They then viewed a school record—adapted from actual office-referral records we collected from a public middle school in California—for a student who misbehaved twice. We manipulated student race by using stereotypically Black (Darnell or Deshawn) or White (Greg or Jake) names (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998; Levitt & Dubner, 2005). Teachers read about the student's infractions (one for insubordination and the other for class disturbance), the order of which was counterbalanced across participants (the text of the infractions is in the Supplemental Material). After each infraction, participants were asked "How severe was the student's misbehavior?" "To what extent is the student hindering you from maintaining order in your class?" "How irritated do you feel by the student?" and "How severely should the student be disciplined?" All questions were rated separately on scales ranging from 1, *not at all*, to 7, *extremely*.

Next, we tested application of the troublemaker stereotype. After reading about both infractions, teachers were asked to rate how likely it was that they would say the student is a troublemaker (from 1, *not at all*, to 5, *extremely*). As a manipulation check, we asked teachers

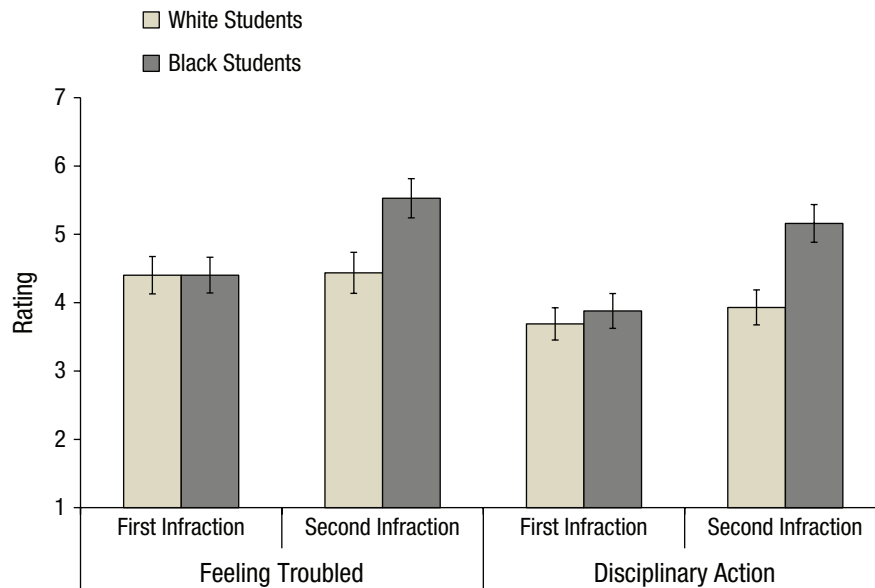


Fig. 1. Results from Study 1: mean ratings of how troubled teachers felt by students' misbehavior (left) and how severely they felt students should be disciplined (right) as a function of number of infractions and student race. Error bars represent standard errors.

how likely it was that the student's name was that of a Black person (from 1, *not at all*, to 5, *extremely*). We then measured teachers' responses to additional control variables. These included asking teachers to guess the likelihood that the student is from a low-income neighborhood as well as to guess the racial demographics of the school the student attended (for results, see the Supplemental Material). Finally, teachers were probed for suspicion about the study's hypotheses, debriefed, and paid.

Results

Preliminary analyses. Our teacher sample was racially diverse; however, there was not enough variation across different racial groups in the teacher sample to make meaningful comparisons. Therefore, all analyses were collapsed across teacher race. One teacher failed the suspicion check, and one teacher failed the manipulation check. Two participants did not complete the attention and manipulation checks. Their data were removed from analyses, which brought the total sample size to 53 (for more information, see the Supplemental Material).

Primary analyses. Because ratings for perceived infraction severity, hindrance, and irritation were highly correlated, they were combined to create one composite variable, "feeling troubled," for the first and second infractions, $\alpha = .90$ and $\alpha = .89$, respectively. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a main effect of number of

infractions, $F(1, 51) = 6.89, p = .011$, and a trending effect of student race, $F(1, 51) = 2.72, p = .11$, on feeling troubled (Fig. 1). As predicted, there was a significant interaction between number of infractions and student race, $F(1, 51) = 6.09, p = .017$. A paired-samples t test revealed that teachers felt no more troubled from the first infraction to the second when the student was White, $t(28) = 0.11, p = .917, d < 0.1$. However, teachers felt significantly more troubled by the second infraction ($M = 5.53, SD = 1.04$) than the first infraction ($M = 4.40, SD = 1.48$) when the student was Black, $t(23) = 4.06, p < .001, d = 1.9$. Further, a two-tailed independent-samples t test revealed no effect of student race for the first infraction, $t(51) < -0.01, p = .999, d < 0.1$, but a significant effect of student race after the second infraction, $t(51) = -2.80, p = .007, d = 0.9$. Teachers felt more troubled after the second infraction committed by a Black student ($M = 5.53, SD = 1.04$) than after the second infraction committed by a White student ($M = 4.44, SD = 1.66$).

Next, we conducted an ANOVA on how severely teachers felt the student should be disciplined. This analysis revealed significant main effects of both number of infractions, $F(1, 51) = 18.25, p < .001$, and student race, $F(1, 51) = 4.31, p = .043$. As predicted, the interaction was significant, $F(1, 51) = 8.56, p = .005$ (Fig. 1). A paired-samples t test revealed no significant difference in discipline ratings across infractions for the White student, $t(28) = -0.98, p = .336, d = 0.37$. However, teachers thought the Black student should be disciplined more severely after the second infraction ($M = 5.13, SD = 0.95$)

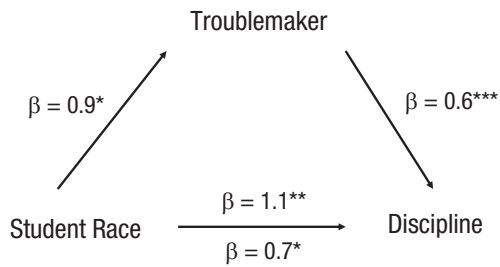


Fig. 2. Model used in Study 1 to predict the effect of student race on how severely teachers felt the student should be disciplined, as mediated by labeling a student as a troublemaker. Along the bottom path, the value above the arrow shows the total effect, and the value below the arrow shows the direct effect after controlling for the mediator. Asterisks indicate significant paths (* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$).

than after the first infraction ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.34$), $t(23) = -4.99$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.10$. There was no student-race effect on discipline ratings for the first infraction, $t(51) = -0.41$, $p = .686$, $d = 0.15$, whereas there was a significant student-race effect on discipline ratings for the second infraction, $t(51) = -3.11$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.89$. After the second infraction, teachers thought the Black student's misbehavior should be met with more severe discipline ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 0.95$) than the White student's misbehavior ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.67$). Thus, after only two strikes, racial disparities in discipline emerge.

As predicted, the Black student ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.5$) was significantly more likely than the White student ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.5$) to be labeled a troublemaker, $t(50) = 2.04$, $p = .05$.¹ In fact, the more likely teachers were to think the student was Black (on the basis of the student's name), the more likely they were to label the student a troublemaker, $r(50) = .29$, $p = .04$.

To ascertain whether labeling a student as a troublemaker mediated the effect of student race on disciplinary ratings after multiple infractions, we used mediation procedures with Model 4 of the SPSS macro PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) and 10,000 bias-corrected bootstrap resamples (see Fig. 2). The predicted mediation (indirect path through labeling a student as a troublemaker) was significant, $b = 0.49$, $SE = 0.26$, 95% confidence interval (CI) = [0.05, 1.11] (see the Supplemental Material for details of analyses).

Discussion

In sum, teachers escalated their response to a Black student more so than to a White student when the student had only one previous infraction, even though both infractions were minor and each was distinctive from the other—insubordination versus classroom disturbance. As predicted, for the Black student, the first infraction seemed to influence how the second infraction was regarded. Indeed, our theory held that teachers are more

likely to view multiple infractions as a connected pattern when the student is Black as opposed to White.

Study 2

In a second study, we directly measured the extent to which teachers thought the infractions were indicative of a pattern, and we examined whether this “pattern perception” mediated the relationship between race and disciplinary action. Further, in an attempt to get a better idea of how these effects relate to real-world disparities in suspension rates, we asked teachers to indicate the extent to which they could imagine themselves suspending the student at some point in the future.

Method

Participants and design. We recruited 204 K–12 teachers (147 females, 55 males, and 2 unknown; average experience: 12 years; average class size: 31; average age: 40 years; 166 White, 17 Black, 10 Asian, 6 Latino, 2 other, and 3 unknown) from the Web sites of school districts across the country to participate in Study 2. Thirteen teachers were excluded from analyses (see the Supplemental Material), which brought the total sample size to 191. Like Study 1, the study had a 2 (student race: Black vs. White) \times 2 (number of infractions: one vs. two) mixed design, with the number of infractions serving as the within-subjects factor. In this study, we sought to increase the sample size to 100 participants per cell. We stopped the study when that target was reached.

Procedure and stimuli. We used the same procedure as in Study 1. However, after teachers reported the likelihood that they would say the student was a troublemaker, we asked them to rate the extent to which they thought the student's misbehaviors were indicative of a pattern (from 1, *not at all*, to 5, *extremely*) and the extent to which they could imagine themselves suspending the student at some point in the future (from 1, *not at all*, to 5, *extremely*).

Results

As in Study 1, perceived infraction severity, hindrance, and irritation were highly correlated and were thus combined to create one composite variable, “feeling troubled,” for the first and second infractions, $\alpha = .76$ and $\alpha = .87$, respectively. An ANOVA revealed main effects of number of infractions, $F(1, 189) = 82.00$, $p < .001$, and student race, $F(1, 189) = 7.51$, $p = .007$, on how troubled teachers felt (Fig. 3). As predicted, there was a significant interaction between number of infractions and student race, $F(1, 189) = 3.97$, $p = .048$. More specifically, a

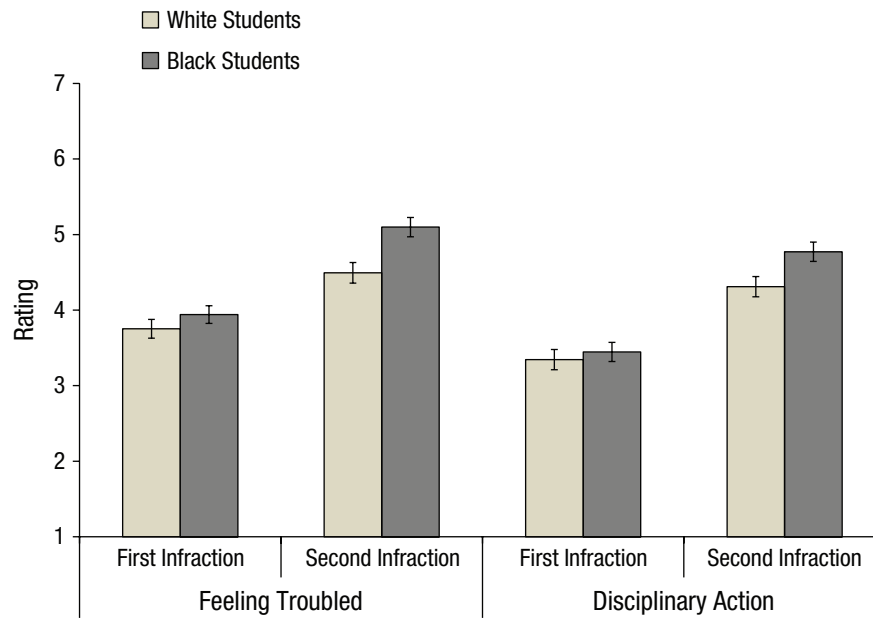


Fig. 3. Results from Study 2: mean ratings of how troubled teachers felt by students' misbehavior (left) and how severely they felt students should be disciplined (right) as a function of number of infractions and student race. Error bars represent standard errors.

paired-samples *t* test revealed a significant increase in feeling troubled from the first ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.22$) to the second ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.42$) infraction when the student was White, $t(89) = 4.62$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.0$. However, teachers showed a sharper increase from the first ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.13$) to the second ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.16$) infraction when the student was Black, $t(100) = 8.45$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.7$, which replicated the result in Study 1. A two-tailed independent-samples *t* test revealed no effect of student race for the first infraction, $t(189) = -1.11$, $p = .270$, $d = 0.2$. However, a significant effect of student race emerged after the second infraction, $t(189) = -3.24$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.5$. Again, teachers felt more troubled by the second infraction when it was committed by a Black student than when it was committed by a White student.

An ANOVA on discipline ratings revealed a significant main effect of number of infractions, $F(1, 189) = 181.18$, $p < .001$, and a trending effect of student race, $F(1, 189) = 2.96$, $p = .087$ (Fig. 3). As predicted, the significant interaction in Study 1 was replicated, $F(1, 189) = 4.47$, $p = .036$. A paired-samples *t* test revealed a significant increase in discipline ratings from the first ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.39$) to the second ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.42$) infraction for the White student, $t(89) = 7.39$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.6$. However, there was a sharper increase in discipline ratings for the Black student from the first ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.14$) to the second ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.13$) infraction, $t(100) = 11.96$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.4$. There was no student-race effect on discipline ratings for the first infraction, $t(189) = -0.55$, $p = .583$, $d = 0.1$, whereas there was a

significant student-race effect on discipline ratings for the final infraction, $t(189) = -2.50$, $p = .013$, $d = 0.4$. Teachers ultimately thought the Black student's misbehavior should be met with more severe discipline than the White student's misbehavior.

The Black student was significantly more likely ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.90$) than the White student ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.97$) to be labeled a troublemaker, $t(189) = -2.23$, $p = .027$, $d = 0.3$.² And the more likely teachers were to think the student was Black, the more likely they were to label the student a troublemaker, $r(187) = .28$, $p < .001$, which replicated the results found in Study 1.

As predicted, the Black student's misbehavior was significantly more likely ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.86$) than the White student's misbehavior ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.84$) to be perceived as indicative of a pattern, $t(187) = -2.67$, $p = .008$, $d = 0.4$. And the more likely that teachers were to think the student was Black, the more likely they were to perceive his misbehavior as indicative of a pattern, $r(185) = .22$, $p = .002$. Thus, not only were the infractions produced by a Black student treated as more extreme than the identical infractions produced by a White student, Black infractions were also viewed as more connected—one infraction informed how the next infraction should be regarded.

Finally, although both infractions were minor, we were interested in the extent to which teachers would use such minor infractions to predict future suspensions. Indeed, we found that teachers were significantly more likely to imagine themselves suspending the Black student in the future

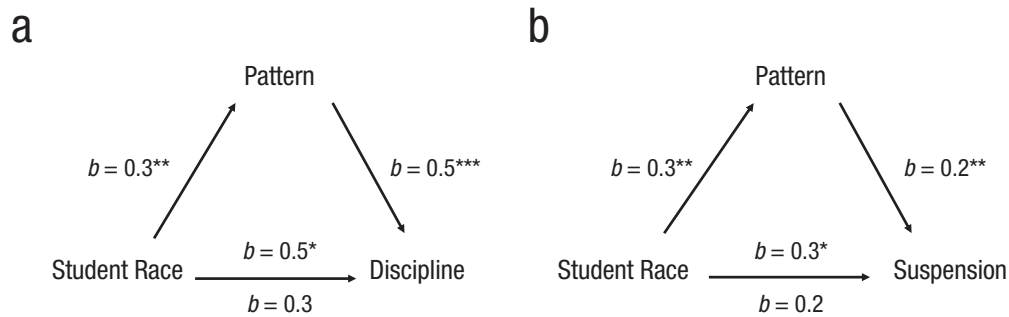


Fig. 4. Models used in Study 2 to examine the mediating role of belief that a student's misbehaviors are indicative of a pattern. The models predicted the effect of student race on (a) how severely teachers felt the student should be disciplined and (b) whether teachers could imagine themselves suspending a misbehaving student in the future. Along the bottom path, the value above the arrow shows the total effect, and the value below the arrow shows the direct effect after controlling for the mediator. Asterisks indicate significant paths (* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$).

($M = 2.28$, $SD = 0.84$) compared with the White student ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 0.85$), $t(188) = -2.07$, $p = .039$, $d = 0.3$.⁵ And, the more likely teachers were to think the student was Black, the more likely they were to imagine themselves suspending that student in the future, $r(188) = .15$, $p = .036$.

We tested the same mediation model from Study 1 (see Fig. S1 in the Supplemental Material), in which labeling a student as a troublemaker was used as a mediator for the effect of student race on discipline. The predicted mediation path was significant, $b = 0.23$, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI = [0.03, 0.44]. We then tested whether believing that a student's infractions are indicative of a pattern could stand alone as the mediator of the same process (Fig. 4a). This mediation path was also significant, $b = 0.15$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI = [0.04, 0.32]. Finally, we tested whether pattern perception mediated the effect of student race on whether teachers imagined themselves suspending the student in the future (Fig. 4b). This mediation path was also significant, $b = 0.07$, $SE < 0.1$, 95% CI = [0.02, 0.17] (see the Supplemental Material for details of analyses).

General Discussion

In correlational studies involving thousands of schools across the United States, other researchers have found that teachers are inclined to disproportionately discipline students as a function of race (e.g., Skiba et al., 2002). However, the present work was the first to examine the causal impact of race on disciplinary practices and to highlight the psychological mechanisms involved in producing this effect.

The research we report here not only addresses a practical problem with social significance, but also has theoretical significance. Psychological research on stereotyping and discrimination is typically based on cross-sectional studies (but see Shelton & Richeson, 2006; Shook & Fazio, 2008) involving judgments about a given target

about whom little individuating information is provided (Brewer, 1988; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). Even in those studies in which individuating information is provided, researchers rarely investigate how stereotypes can lead people to detect behavioral patterns across time, nor do they investigate how one behavior can influence how a second behavior is perceived. Indeed, researchers pay little attention to how negative interactions can escalate and why—despite ample anecdotal evidence for escalation in interactions in general and across many contexts.

Even in real-world schooling contexts, researchers have failed to note the Black-escalation effect, although evidence consistent with such an effect is quite striking. For example, we analyzed national data on suspensions from school (Office for Civil Rights, 2012) as a function of the number of suspensions (one suspension versus two or more). We found that racial disparities in suspension rates are even more stark for students who have been suspended two (or more) times as opposed to students who have been suspended a single time (Table 1). The increase from single to multiple suspensions is significantly greater for Black students compared with each other racial group (at $p < .01$ on chi-square tests of independence). In fact, the suspension data for Black and White students look eerily similar to the discipline data in Studies 1 and 2 (Fig. 5; for more information, see the Supplemental Material).

Given racial differences in academic achievement (Steele, 2003), alienation from school (Walton & Cohen, 2007), trust in school authorities (Cohen, Steele, & Ross, 1999), and so forth, racial differences in student misbehavior would not be surprising. Yet what we have shown here is that racial disparities in discipline can occur even when Black and White students behave in the same manner. We have shown experimentally, for the first time, that teacher responses can contribute to racial disparities in discipline. In fact, teacher responses may even help to

Table 1. Disproportionality of Single and Multiple Suspensions From School in U.S. Public Schools as a Function of Race

Population	Black (%)	White (%)	Asian (%)	Latino (%)
All students enrolled ($N = \sim 48,000,000$)	16.7	54.9	5.2	22.3
Students suspended once ($n = 1,488,753$)	33.3	27.3	2.6	24.2
Students suspended multiple times ($n = 1,108,910$)	44.3	32.6	1.8	21.8

Note: The table shows the racial distributions of students in each of the three indicated groups. The database included students from prekindergarten to 12th grade. Data were obtained from the Office for Civil Rights (2012). Percentages for American Indians are not shown because the standard errors for these estimates exceeded 30% to 50%, and thus interpreting those results would require particular caution.

drive racial differences in student behavior—differential treatment by teachers, to some extent, may inspire repeated misbehavior by Black students. This possibility is worth investigating in future research.

The Black-escalation effect we report here might also occur in other contexts in which infractions are repeated over time. For example, might Black repeat offenders be treated more harshly than White repeat offenders by police officers on the street or by judges in the courtroom? Just as escalating responses to multiple infractions committed by Black students might feed racial disparities in disciplinary practices in K–12 schooling, so too might escalating responses to multiple infractions committed by Black suspects feed racial disparities in the criminal-justice system. Across many groups, across many contexts, stereotypes may not only provide people with the labels needed to understand a specific behavior, but also may enhance their ability to see patterns across behaviors and to adjust their responses accordingly.

Author Contributions

Both authors developed the conceptual framework for the study, designed the study, and wrote the manuscript. J. A.

Okonofua performed testing and data collection under the supervision of J. L. Eberhardt. Both authors approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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Supplemental Material

Additional supporting information can be found at <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data>

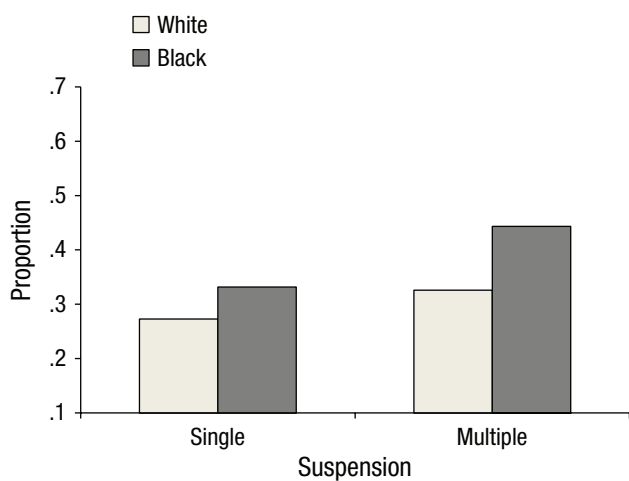


Fig. 5. Results from the follow-up study: proportion of single versus multiple suspensions from school for Black and White students.

Notes

1. One teacher did not respond to this item.
2. Three teachers did not complete the measure asking how likely it was that the student's name was that of a Black person.
3. One teacher's response was more than 2.5 standard deviations from the mean and was thus removed from this analysis.

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