

Ethnic inequalities in child development and health: an examination and comparison across the United Kingdom, the United States, and New Zealand

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Introduction

This Hallsworth Research Fellowship aims to understand the production of ethnic inequalities in child development and health by examining the differential pathways through which social, behavioural and contextual exposures at the individual, neighbourhood and national level lead to preventable ethnic inequalities in the contrasting locations of the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US), and New Zealand (NZ).

Differences in health across ethnic groups have been documented in the UK, the US, NZ, and elsewhere, with higher rates of morbidity and mortality reported for ethnic minority adults, compared with their white counterparts. For example, ethnic minority groups in the UK are up to 50% more likely than white British people to report poor self-rated health, and similar patterns of health inequalities have been observed in other health outcomes.

Not surprisingly, recent studies have also reported the global existence of inequalities in the ethnic patterning of child health and development across several outcomes for some ethnic minority groups.

But despite repeated global documentation of ethnic health inequalities, the causal mechanisms are still largely unexplained.

To date, research on ethnic health inequalities has largely focused on adults and, particularly in the UK and NZ, research on child health and development has mainly examined the white population. Exploring the risk factors that lead to preventable ethnic inequalities in child development and health is particularly relevant because it is not clear when and how the ethnic patterning of chronic disease risk emerges during the early life course, and whether this varies across ethnic groups and/or national contexts.

This work aims to provide a greater understanding of the determinants of health inequalities in different countries, examining differences by ethnic groups across three national contexts.

It analyses four longitudinal datasets: the UK Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), the US Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), the US Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K), and the Growing Up in New Zealand birth cohort Study (GUINZ). These datasets have high numbers of ethnic minority children, and are relatively comparable in design, survey methodology, and questionnaire coverage.

Paper 1: A longitudinal examination of maternal, family, and area-level experiences of racism on children's socioemotional development: patterns and possible explanations; *Social Science & Medicine*, 142, 128-135.

This study examines the longitudinal association between maternal, family, and area-level experiences of racial discrimination, and children's socioemotional development.



We proposed that exposure to racial discrimination would be detrimental to children's socioemotional development via two mother-centred stress pathways: a worsening in maternal mental health, and an increase in harsh parenting practices (see Figure). Data on ethnic minority mothers and their children were drawn from waves 3 to 5 (2006 – 2012) of the UK Millennium Cohort Study.

Results of longitudinal path analyses show a strong association between maternal and family experiences of racial discrimination in wave 3, and a worsening in mother's mental health in wave 4. Maternal and family experiences of racial discrimination at wave 3 had an indirect effect on children's socioemotional development at wave 5. This occurred mainly via a worsening in mother's mental health, although some events of racial discrimination experienced by the mother and other family members also impacted negatively on children's socioemotional development via an increase in harsh parenting practices. We found a direct effect of maternal and family experiences of racial discrimination on children's socioemotional development.

Findings document the harm of growing up in a racist environment on the socioemotional development of children, and provide some evidence for the role of mother-centered stress mechanisms in linking vicarious exposure to racial discrimination to children's socioemotional development.

Paper 2: Understanding the Influence of Ethnicity, Gender, and Class on Inequalities in Academic and Non-Academic Outcomes among Eighth-Grade Students: Findings from an Intersectionality Approach; *PLoS ONE*, forthcoming.

Socioeconomic, ethnic, and gender inequalities in academic achievement have been widely reported in the US, but how these three axes of inequality intersect to determine academic and non-academic outcomes among school-aged children is not well understood.

This paper uses data from the US Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten (ECLS-K; N=10,115), to apply an intersectionality approach to examine inequalities across eighth-grade outcomes at the intersection of six ethnic and gender groups (Latino girls and boys, Black girls and boys, and White girls and boys) and four classes of socioeconomic advantage/disadvantage.

Results of mixture models show large inequalities in socioemotional outcomes (internalising behavior, locus of control, and self-concept) across classes of advantage/disadvantage. Within classes of advantage/disadvantage, ethnic and gender inequalities are predominantly found in the most advantaged class, where Black boys and girls, and Latina girls, underperform White boys in academic assessments (see Table 1), but not in socioemotional outcomes. In these latter outcomes, Black boys and girls perform better than White boys. Latino boys show small differences as compared to White boys, mainly in science assessments.

Table 1. Within-class differences in academic outcomes across racial/ethnic and gender groups

	Class 1: Individually and Contextually Disadvantaged	Class 2: Individually Wealthy, Contextually Disadvantaged	Class 3: Individually and Contextually Wealthy	Class 4: Individually Disadvantaged, Contextually Wealthy
	Coeff (S.E.)	Coeff (S.E.)	Coeff (S.E.)	Coeff (S.E.)
Math Scores				
White boys	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
White girls	2.46 (2.59)	0.08 (2.16)	-1.05 (0.52)*	0.87 (1.08)
Black boys	-4.74 (1.62)***	-4.58 (2.08)*	-4.76 (2.34)*	-2.95 (1.66)
Black girls	-4.04 (1.51)**	-6.09 (1.69)***	-6.51 (1.64)***	-4.75 (2.61)
Hispanic boys	0.54 (1.42)	-2.84 (1.61)	-1.98 (1.44)	-0.84 (1.46)
Hispanic girls	-0.13 (1.41)	-3.55 (1.30)**	-2.06 (1.37)	1.69 (1.52)
Reading Scores				
White boys	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
White girls	4.80 (3.57)	0.83 (2.54)	1.91 (0.50)***	2.90 (1.07)**
Black boys	-4.57 (1.17)***	-3.50 (1.65)*	-5.73 (2.18)**	-4.42 (1.64)**
Black girls	-1.41 (1.38)	-3.57 (1.45)**	-3.01 (1.93)	-0.40 (1.19)
Hispanic boys	-0.13 (1.07)	-2.90 (1.63)	-2.19 (1.61)	-2.25 (1.58)
Hispanic girls	1.79 (1.14)	-0.79 (1.25)	-0.14 (1.36)	2.32 (1.20)*
Science Scores				
White boys	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
White girls	2.49 (2.26)	-2.19 (2.22)	-2.03 (0.46)***	-0.33 (1.03)
Black boys	-3.93 (1.34)***	-4.58 (1.70)**	-6.27 (2.10)***	-5.41 (1.65)***
Black girls	-5.26 (1.33)***	-6.52 (1.70)***	-11.24 (1.50)***	-7.52 (2.18)***
Hispanic boys	0.69 (1.16)	-2.80 (1.92)	-2.39 (1.17)*	-2.17 (1.82)
Hispanic girls	0.62 (1.17)	-4.29 (1.30)***	-4.73 (1.24)***	-1.85 (1.41)

The contrasting outcomes between ethnic and gender minority students in self-assessment and socioemotional outcomes, as compared to standardised assessments, provide support for the detrimental effect that intersecting ethnic and gender discrimination have in patterning academic outcomes that predict success in adult life.

Interventions to eliminate achievement gaps cannot fully succeed as long as social stratification caused by gender and racial discrimination is not addressed.

Other papers

Other papers published/forthcoming/in press from this fellowship examine: 1) the association between racial discrimination and prenatal and postnatal depression in New Zealand; 2) cross-national comparisons of neighbourhood effects on child socioemotional development in the US and in the UK; 3) the bi-directional association between weight and height in the UK; 4) cross-national comparisons of mixed ethnicity children in the UK and in the US; 5) the association between racial discrimination and birth outcomes in New Zealand.