

THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION AND EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS BY RACIAL MINORITY STATUS

Sabrina Dorceus, & Tanya Joseph

Department of career guidance, Université de Sherbrooke (Canada)

Abstract

Recent research in career development highlights the potential impact of perceived discrimination on the career choices of individuals from marginalized groups, including racialized communities (Swanson & Fouad, 2020). Perceptions of both overt and covert forms of discrimination—such as microaggressions—could contribute to the narrowing of career options (Poon, 2014), foster negative perceptions regarding career future (Conkel-Ziebell et al., 2019), and lower career expectations (O’Hara et al., 2012). Despite these findings, few studies have systematically assessed perceptions of discrimination, and their association to career choices remains underexplored, particularly when considering racial minority status within the Canadian context. Therefore, this study aims to 1) examine the association between perceived discrimination and educational expectations of high school students from diverse backgrounds and 2) explore whether these associations differ based on students’ racial minority status. To address these objectives, a sample of 756 high school students from Quebec (Canada) completed an online survey between May 2022 and February 2023 ($M = 16.3$ years old; $SD = 0.9$). Among the participants, 52% identified as female, 46% as male, and 2% identified otherwise. Notably, the sample includes a majority of racialized students (72%) and over one-third of students with an immigrant background (38%). The frequency of perceptions of both overt (physical and verbal violence, exclusion and injustice, stigmatization) and covert (environmental invalidations, assumption of inferiority, invisibility and devaluation, assumption of criminality) discrimination was assessed using adapted items from validated scales. Educational expectations were identified by the highest level of education individuals realistically expected to achieve. Moderation regression analyses with racial minority status as a categorical moderator were conducted, controlling for parental education levels. Significant associations emerged between specific forms of perceived discrimination and educational expectations. More frequent perceptions of invisibility and devaluation, environmental invalidations, and stigmatization were negatively associated with educational expectations. Moreover, the moderation analysis revealed that the association between assumption of criminality and educational expectations differed by racial minority status. Specifically, the association was negative among non-racialized youth, but substantially attenuated among racialized youth. These findings suggest that the association between perceived discrimination and educational expectations may be shaped by identity-related coping mechanisms and contextual interpretation of discriminatory experiences.

Keywords: *Perceived discrimination, educational expectations, high school students, racial minorities, regression analyses.*

1. Introduction

Recent research in career development highlights the potential impact of perceived discrimination on the career choices of individuals from marginalized groups, including racialized communities (Swanson & Fouad, 2020). Perceptions of both overt and covert forms of discrimination—such as microaggressions—could contribute to the narrowing of career options (Poon, 2014), foster negative perceptions regarding career future (Conkel-Ziebell et al., 2019), and lower career expectations (O’Hara et al., 2012). Despite these findings, few studies have systematically assessed perceptions of discrimination, and their association with career choices remains underexplored, particularly when considering racial minority status within the Canadian context.

2. Objectives

To address this issue, the present study relies on a quantitative design to systematically examine perceived discrimination and its relationship with educational expectations. More specifically, this study aims to 1) examine the association between perceptions of both overt (e.g., physical and verbal violence, exclusion and injustice) and covert forms (e.g., environmental invalidations, assumption of criminality) of discrimination and educational expectations of high school students from diverse backgrounds and 2) explore whether these associations differ based on students' racial minority status.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of 1056 high school students from Quebec (Canada), of whom 756 (M = 16.3 years old; SD = 0.9) completed an online survey between May 2022 and February 2023 on a voluntary basis in class or at home following an email invitation sent by their school. Among the participants, 52% identified as female, 46% as male, and 2% identified otherwise. Notably, the sample includes a majority of racialized students (72%) and over one-third of students with an immigrant background (38%). Prior to accessing the online questionnaire, participants were required to provide free and informed consent through an electronic consent form. The study received approval from the ethics committee of the researchers' university.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Perceived discrimination. Overt dimensions of perceived discrimination were measured using 16 items adapted from the *Lifetime Brief Perceived Ethnic Discrimination Questionnaire-Community Version* (Brondolo et al., 2005). Exploratory factor analyses supported a three-factor structure (physical and verbal violence, exclusion and injustice, stigmatization) with satisfactory model fit and internal consistency ($\omega = .83$ to $.86$). Covert dimensions of perceived discrimination were selected and adapted from two existing scales: the *Racial Microaggressions Scale* (Torres-Harding et al., 2012) and the *Microaggressions Against Religious Individuals Scale* (Cheng et al., 2019). A four-factor solution (environmental invalidations, assumption of inferiority, invisibility and devaluation, and assumption of criminality) showed acceptable fit indices and adequate internal consistency ($\omega = .74$ to $.84$). Participants reported the frequency with which each described situation occurred due to their distinctive characteristics using a five-point Likert scale (0 = never, 4 = very often).

3.2.2. Educational expectations. Educational expectations were measured as the highest level of education individuals realistically expected to achieve. Although initially assessed on a ten-level scale ranging from no diploma to a doctoral degree, the variable was treated as continuous in the analyses.

3.2.3. Sociodemographic information. Participants provided information on various sociodemographic characteristics, including their racial minority status (yes/no).

3.3. Statistical analyses

Moderation regression analyses were conducted in SPSS (Version 29) using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022), controlling for parental education levels.

4. Results

Table 1 presents the results of the moderation regression analyses examining the associations between different forms of perceived discrimination and educational expectations according to racial minority status. Significant direct associations emerged for some forms of perceived discrimination. More specifically, higher frequencies of perceived invisibility and devaluation ($\beta = -0.18$, $p = .029$), environmental invalidations ($\beta = -0.16$, $p = .037$), and stigmatization ($\beta = -0.17$, $p = .034$) are associated with lower educational expectations. Taken together, these direct associations all reflect small effect sizes according to Cohen's (1988) benchmarks. By contrast, the direct associations between the other forms of perceived discrimination and educational expectations remain non-significant (with p-values ranging from .052 to .581).

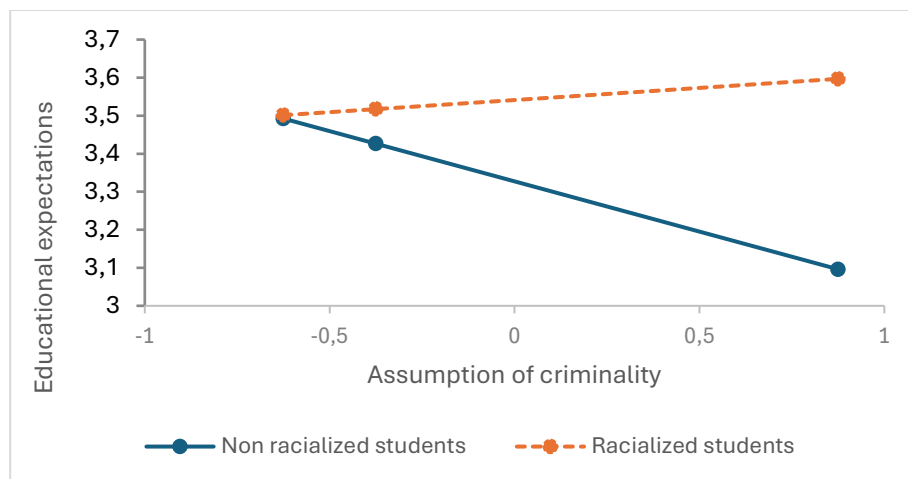
Furthermore, the moderation analysis revealed one significant interaction between perceived discrimination and racial minority status. Specifically, the association between assumption of criminality and educational expectations differed by racial minority status ($B = 0.33, p = .037$). This interaction is illustrated in Figure 1. Conditional effects analyses suggest a negative and marginally significant effect for non-racialized students ($B = -0.26, p = .052$), and a non-significant effect for racialized students ($B = 0.06, p = .420$). In other words, among non-racialized students, a higher frequency of assumption of criminality is associated with lower educational expectations, whereas this association is substantially attenuated among racialized students.

Table 1. Association between perceived discrimination and educational expectations according to racial minority status.

	B	95% CI	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	β^a	R ²	ΔR^2
<i>Assumption of inferiority (INF) (n = 447)</i>							.129	.003
Constant	1.95	[1.54, 2.36]	0.21	9.40	< .001			
INF	-0.07	[-0.30, 0.17]	0.12	-0.55	.581	-0.05		
Racial minority status (RM)	0.20	[-0.06, 0.45]	0.13	1.51	.133			
INF $\times$ RM	0.16	[-0.11, 0.43]	0.14	1.18	.237			
<i>Invisibility and devaluation (INV-D) (n = 448)</i>							.141	.002
Constant	1.98	[1.57, 2.38]	0.21	9.59	< .001			
INV-D	-0.29	[-0.55, -0.03]	0.13	-2.18	.029	-0.18		
Racial minority status (RM)	0.18	[-0.07, 0.43]	0.13	1.41	.159			
INV-D $\times$ RM	0.14	[-0.17, 0.46]	0.16	0.89	.372			
<i>Environmental invalidations (ENV) (n = 448)</i>							.139	.002
Constant	1.92	[1.51, 2.33]	0.21	9.27	< .001			
ENV	-0.23	[-0.45, -0.01]	0.11	-2.09	.037	-0.16		
Racial minority status (RM)	0.23	[-0.03, 0.48]	0.13	1.75	.081			
ENV $\times$ RM	0.13	[-0.14, 0.40]	0.14	0.95	.344			
<i>Assumption of criminality (CRIM) (n = 448)</i>							.135	.009
Constant	1.92	[1.51, 2.33]	0.21	9.26	< .001			
CRIM	-0.26	[-0.53, 0.00]	0.14	-1.95	.052	-0.17		
Racial minority status (RM)	0.21	[-0.04, 0.47]	0.13	1.65	.100			
CRIM $\times$ RM	0.33	[0.02, 0.64]	0.16	2.09	.037			
<i>Physical and verbal violence (PVV) (n = 443)</i>							.135	.000
Constant	1.96	[1.56, 2.37]	0.21	9.47	< .001			
PVV	-0.19	[-0.48, 0.09]	0.15	-1.31	.189	-0.11		
Racial minority status (RM)	0.18	[-0.07, 0.43]	0.13	1.39	.166			
PVV $\times$ RM	0.03	[-0.31, 0.38]	0.18	0.19	.849			
<i>Exclusion and injustice (E/I) (n = 443)</i>							.127	.000
Constant	1.95	[1.54, 2.36]	0.21	9.32	< .001			
E/I	-0.09	[-0.39, 0.20]	0.15	-0.63	.527	-0.06		
Racial minority status (RM)	0.20	[-0.06, 0.46]	0.13	1.54	.125			
E/I $\times$ RM	0.07	[-0.27, 0.41]	0.17	0.39	.695			
<i>Stigmatization (STIG) (n = 444)</i>							.135	.004
Constant	1.97	[1.56, 2.38]	0.21	9.51	< .001			
STIG	-0.23	[-0.44, -0.02]	0.11	-2.13	.034	-0.17		
Racial minority status (RM)	0.20	[-0.05, 0.45]	0.13	1.55	.122			
STIG $\times$ RM	0.19	[-0.07, 0.45]	0.13	1.44	.151			

Note. *n* values correspond to the sample size for each analysis, depending on the specific form of perceived discrimination examined. ^aHayes' PROCESS macro does not allow for the automatic generation of standardized beta coefficients. Standardized coefficients were computed a posteriori for the direct effects; however, as noted by Hayes (2022), the a posteriori calculation of standardized beta coefficients for interaction effects is not recommended. β : .10 = small effect size, .30 = moderate effect size, .50 = large effect size. R²: .01 = small effect size, .09 = moderate effect size, .25 = large effect size.

Figure 1. Variation in the association between the frequency of perceptions related to assumption of criminality and educational expectations according to racial minority status.



Note. Frequency values of perceptions related to assumption of criminality are mean-centered.

5. Discussion

The results first showed that higher frequencies of perceived invisibility and devaluation, environmental invalidations, and stigmatization were associated with lower educational expectations, which is consistent with the findings of O'Hara et al. (2012). More specifically, these results suggest that students who perceive these forms of discrimination more frequently tend to have lower career expectations, or conversely, that students with lower career expectations may be more likely to perceive these forms of discrimination. Moreover, the modest associations observed between the different forms of perceived discrimination and expectations may partly reflect the multicultural composition of the sample—predominantly composed of students from visible minority and immigrant backgrounds—as well as the presence of intercultural policies in most participating schools (Commission scolaire de la Pointe-de-l'Île, 2009). This context may limit the sample's representativeness and contribute to underestimating the actual frequency of perceived discrimination. Indeed, such a multicultural environment, where students are exposed daily to cultural diversity and inclusive practices, may reduce the occurrence and salience of discriminatory experiences.

Furthermore, the results revealed a significant interaction between the frequency of assumption of criminality and racial minority status, whereby the association was negative for non-racialized students and substantially attenuated among racialized students. The negative association observed among non-racialized students could be interpreted through the “exclusion shock” hypothesis, which refers to a mismatch between an expectation of inclusion and an actual experience of discrimination (Telles & Ortiz, 2008), thereby amplifying the potential effect of discrimination. By contrast, racialized students could rely on a compensatory strategy to cope with discrimination, a mechanism also discussed by Bourdon et al. (2022) in relation to youth from immigrant backgrounds.

6. Conclusions

In light of the present findings, career development practice should focus on exploring students' experiences of discrimination (e.g., invisibility and devaluation, environmental invalidations, assumption of criminality, and stigmatization), revisiting career options that were eliminated due to perceived barriers and examining potentially lowered career expectations (Fouad & Kantamneni, 2021). In addition, it would be important to examine perceived discrimination, not only among racialized youth, but also among non-racialized youth. To conclude, a few limitations should be acknowledged. First, given the demographic composition of the participating high schools, the sample includes a disproportionately high number of racialized and immigrant students. As such, the findings could differ in a sample that more closely reflects the broader student population. Second, the use of a general measure of perceived discrimination (i.e., discrimination based on their distinctive characteristics), rather than a measure targeting a specific discriminatory domain (e.g., discrimination based on their race), may have affected how frequently students reported experiencing such incidents, as it may have been more difficult for them to connect their experiences to discrimination when the reference point (i.e., distinctive characteristics) is overly broad. Third, because participating students reported relatively high educational expectations, it remains uncertain

whether they fully considered the realistic aspects involved in forming these expectations. Finally, the separate multiple regressions conducted do not account for potential correlations between the different forms of perceived discrimination, which limits the interpretation of the results (Field, 2018). Future studies should include more representative samples, refine career expectations measures, and examine in greater depth the effects of specific forms of perceived discrimination.

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