Longitudinal and Concurrent Predictors of Children's Social Competency, Ethnic Identity, & Behavior

Cheryl Fortner-Wood, Casserly Daniels, & Kathleen Jocoy ~ *Winthrop University*

Abstract

Secondary analyses of the NICHD SECCYD examined early and concurrent factors that influence children's social and behavioral outcomes in 1st and 5th grades. Social skills, ethnic identity, and internalizing and externalizing behaviors were the outcomes of interest. Main and interaction effects of child gender and ethnicity and playmate's gender and race were found on measures of child's in-group ethnic preference. Likewise, child race explained mean differences in social skills. 5th grade social skills are partially explained by mother's ratings of the child having a positive relationship with their playmate (*r* =.40). However, even when this was controlled, ethnicity and poverty status seem to be working together to affect social skills.

Background

This presentation has a circuitous history with three touchstones: 1) diversity research in higher education, 2) a naïve interest in ethnic identity development, and 3) our own findings regarding interactions with ethnicity that affect social inhibition over time (see Fortner-Wood, et al, SRCD 2007, 3-068). In reviewing research for a program in higher education, we came across compelling evidence of the benefits of diverse experiences. For example, Tam & Bassett (2004) found that students from high schools with higher levels of diversity earn a first semester college GPA that is .25 to .50 higher than students from less diverse high schools even after controlling for test scores, high school rank, and high school quality. So, when we started collecting information and variables for this presentation, we were hoping to find evidence that experiencing diversity in early childhood would facilitate social skills.

The SECCYD offers a wealth of contextual data over the child's life. This represents a preliminary look at how child and playmate characteristics are related to children's social competence, ethnic identity, and behavior problems in 1st and 5th grade. The research questions and analyses were generated in collaboration with two Honor's undergraduates at Winthrop.

Methods

Participants

Data from the first three phases of the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (secc.rti.org) was used. Initially 1,364 one-month old infants and their mothers were enrolled in the project (51.7% male). 76.4% of the infants were white/not Hispanic, 12.7% were black/not Hispanic, and 6.1% were Hispanic.

Measures

•Child demographic variables were assessed at 1 month. Family income-to-needs ratio was used to reflect the target child's SES.

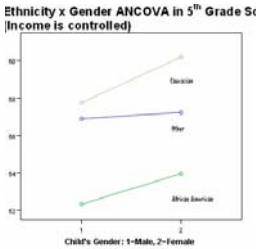
•Children's psychosocial outcomes were assessed in 1st and 5th grades. Playmate variables were assessed in kindergarten and first grade.

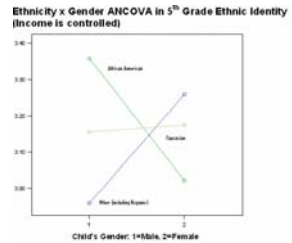
- **•*Social outcomes* of the child included social skills and social problems (Social Skills Rating System, Parent and Caregiver Forms; Gresham & Elliot, 1990) and**
- **•*Internalizing and externalizing behaviors* (Child Behavior Checklist, CBCL/4-18 (Achenbach,1991).**
- **•*Ethnic identity* was measured at first grade in the child's home using the Johnson & Castillo (1994) measure. In 5th grade, Hughes' (1999) modified Multi Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) Questionnaire was used to assess positive affiliation.**

Results and Discussion

Given the 1) significant relationship between income to needs ratio and social skills in 5th grade (*r*=.16, *p* =.000) and 2) the fact that 2/3rds of the African American children in this sample were classified as coming from "poor families," all analyses controlled for the effects of income. The following results were found after income-to-needs ratio was controlled. Of child and playmate ethnicity and gender, only child gender explained differences in children's social skills in 1st grade [*F* (2, 642) = 6.820, *p*=.001]. However, in 5th grade, it was child ethnicity (and not child gender or playmate characteristics) that affected social skills [*F* (2, 948) = 19.478, *p* =.000]. Child ethnicity and gender played no role in internalizing or externalizing behavior ratings in grade 5, but boys were reported to display slightly more disruptive behavior [*F* (1, 947) = 5.290, *p* = .022].

Main and interaction effects of child gender and ethnicity and playmate's gender and ethnicity were found on measures of child's in-group ethnic preference (see figures).

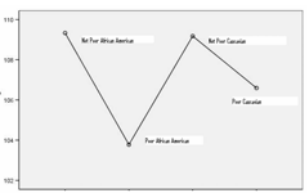




Similarly, a MANCOVA with child's ethnicity and gender as well as playmate's ethnicity and gender revealed one main effect (child's ethnicity) on a composite of ethnic identity variables in first grade. There were no interactions. In 5th grade, there were no main effects on ethnic identity, but there was a small significant interaction of child ethnicity and gender on ethnic identity [*F* (2, 931) = 3.167, *p* =.043]. Although this difference may be explained as part of the normal process of ethnic identity development, it may also be the result of a change in the measure used from first to fifth grade.

A priori, we expected children who had friendships with peers of a different ethnic background than their own to have stronger social skills than children with less diverse experiences. Conversely, our results indicate that children who had a playmate of a different ethnicity did not have higher social skills or fewer behavior problems in either grade. Perhaps this finding is similar to that of Burchinal and Cryer (2003) where a match between child and caregiver ethnicity did not predict higher scores on social or cognitive measures, but sensitivity and stimulation did. This makes sense given that mother's report regarding their child having a positive relationship with the playmate was more strongly related to child's social skills than sheer number of playmates (*r*=.40, *p* =.000 vs. *r*=.09, *p* =.003).

However, even when this was controlled, both African American and Caucasian children who were classified as "not poor" had higher social skills scores than their "poor" peers [*F* (3, 818) = 3.88, *p* =.009].



This study was conducted by the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network supported by NICHD through a cooperative agreement that calls for scientific collaboration between the grantees and the NICHD staff.