The Role of Ethnicity, Poverty, & Gender in Social Inhibition During Early Childhood

Cheryl Fortner-Wood, Kathleen Jocoy & Casserly Daniels

Winthrop University

Abstract

Demographics. 1,364 infants were enrolled in the project at one month and followed through elementary school. Of those,

- 51.7% of the infants were male.
- 76.4% of the infants were white/not Hispanic,
- 12.7% were black/not Hispanic,
- 6.1% were Hispanic.

Demographic information collected at one month was used, e.g. child gender, ethnicity, and family income.

Based on 2005 census estimates, the proportions of the sample that are black and white are representative (12.78% and 76.32%; source: http://factfinder.census.gov). However, the proportion of African Americans in this sample are classified as poor is 67% which is significantly larger than the national percentage (24.7% of all blacks are below 100% of the poverty level, 10.7% of all whites; Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2006 Annual Social and Economic Supplement) and 3.9 times the proportion of whites below the poverty line in this sample. Because of this disparity with national proportions and to prevent an unfair weighting of the not poor white group in the sample (865/1274), we created a subsample of four groups of 50 randomly selected cases (not poor black, poor black, not poor white, and poor white). Follow-up analyses were run with the subsample to substantiate the ethnicity x poverty findings with the larger sample.

Background

In this study, we contribute knowledge on factors that affect developmental changes in social inhibition (SI). Whereas behavioral inhibition (a la Kagan, Reznick, & Snidman, 1988) includes wariness to unfamiliar objects, situations, and people, SI focuses on such reactions involving peers and adults (see Bengtsgard & Bohlin 2001). Just as early behavioral inhibition predisposes children to later anxiety disorders (Biederman, Hirschfeld-Becker, et al., 2001; Tillfors, 2004), SI is a risk factor for a variety of psychosocial problems including internalizing behavior, poorer social competence, less empathy, and poorer social problem solving (Bengtsgard & Bohlin, 2001; Bohlin, Bengtsgard, & Andersson, 2000). Children who exhibit more social inhibition tend to have relationships with their teachers that are not as close or are conflictual (Ryddel, Bohlin, and Thorell, 2005).

Methods

Data from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD) was analyzed to determine how gender, ethnicity, and poverty play a role in social inhibition during the preschool years as well as how these effects affect social competence in the school years. Gender and ethnicity both had a significant effect on early social inhibition, but the groups with higher social inhibition switched from 6 to 54 months. Early social inhibition did not predict later social competence. The gender, ethnicity, and poverty links continued to affect children’s social skills into the school years.

Results

Ethnicity & Poverty. Ethnicity explained variability in social inhibition both during infancy and early childhood and the group effect switched over time (see figures).

African American children displayed more social inhibition than their white peers at 6 months \([t(857)]=4.46, p=0.000\) and less social inhibition at 4.5 years \([t(561)]=2.81, p=0.005\). This difference between African American and Caucasian children persists even when the family income-to-needs ratio is controlled \([t(1,530)=4.126, p=0.043]\) despite the fact that approximately 51.7% of the infants were male.

In general, these results provide mild support for previous evidence of SI as a predictor of later social skills and doing so lends credence to the other findings presented here. Perhaps the most important of these is the discovery of the link between race, poverty, and time on the nature of this link needs fleshing out, supplemental analyses conducted for this presentation suggest this interacting influence on preschooler SI explains some variability in later social skills. We are continuing to explore these links with SI in early childhood and how its influence on SI contributes to social competency over time.

Stability. SI showed more stability between 1 and 6 months \((r=.23, p=0.000)\) than between 6 and 54 months \((r=.09, p=0.038)\). Although these are small relationships, they do support earlier evidence (e.g. Kochanska & Radke-Yarrow, 1992) suggesting early SI is somewhat stable.

SI Predicts Later Social Competence.

As expected, SI during infancy and early childhood was negatively related to mother’s and teacher’s total ratings of the child’s social competence in grade 5 (see table).

Conclusions

In general, these results provide mild support for previous evidence of SI as a predictor of later social skills and doing so lends credence to the other findings presented here. Perhaps the most important of these is the discovery of the link between race, poverty, and time on the expression of social inhibition. While the nature of this link needs fleshing out, supplemental analyses conducted for this presentation suggest this interacting influence on preschooler SI explains some variability in later social skills. We are continuing to explore these links with SI in early childhood and how its influence on SI contributes to social competency over time.

Conclusion 5

In summary, this study provides evidence that early social inhibition is a stable and significant predictor of social competence in middle childhood. Specifically, early SI was significantly and negatively related to mother’s and teacher’s total ratings of the child’s social competence in grade 5 (see table).

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. For more info see: http://secc.rti.org.
The Role of Ethnicity, Poverty, & Gender in Social Inhibition During Early Childhood
Cheryl Fortner-Wood, Kathleen Jocoy & Casserly Daniels
Winthrop University

Some additional findings, a couple of different ways to look at: Ethnicity, Poverty, SI and later social skills:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive Statistics</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child's Birth Order</td>
<td>1354</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother's Age at Child's Birth</td>
<td>1354</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>28.11</td>
<td>.153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother's Marital Status</td>
<td>1302</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>.051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s Education</td>
<td>1365</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14.30</td>
<td>.066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income-to-Needs Ratio - 1 mo</td>
<td>1274</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>25.08</td>
<td>2.7625</td>
<td>.07463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net peer/Poor</td>
<td>1274</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Inhibition at 1 month (avg)</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>34.00</td>
<td>14.3120</td>
<td>.22402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Inhibition at 8 months (avg)</td>
<td>910</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>32.00</td>
<td>15.7374</td>
<td>.13644</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Inhibition at 54 months (avg)</td>
<td>692</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>26.50</td>
<td>23.8970</td>
<td>.34304</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


