

The Role of Race and Severity of Abuse in Teachers' Recognition or Reporting of Child Abuse

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In the United States, reported child abuse rates vary dramatically with race. We employed a scenario methodology to examine whether teachers, whose professional obligations include reporting suspected instances of abuse, exhibit bias in evaluating a possibly abused child. Each teacher (180 White, 180 Black, and 180 Hispanic) read one of six profiles about a hypothetical elementary school student and then expressed extent of agreement with either a statement that the child is being physically abused or a statement that the child should be reported as being physically abused. Within the set of profiles, race of the child and severity of abuse were manipulated. When the child in the profile was severely abused, responses for the two judgmental tasks were comparable. However, when the child was moderately abused, teachers asked whether the child was abused gave higher responses than their counterparts who were asked whether the child should be reported. No effects of race of the child or race of the teacher were observed.

KEY WORDS: child; physical abuse; race; judgment; teachers.

In 1999, there were an estimated 2,822,829 investigated reports of child abuse and neglect nationwide (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2001). Of these reported cases, 25.4% were substantiated. The overall victimization rate was 11.8 per 1000 children. Of course, these figures comprise only the cases that were reported to officials. Some cases of abuse are unrecognized and therefore not reported. Other cases might be recognized as abuse, but are not reported. The numbers of these unexamined cases is unknown.

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More than half of the cases enter the system when a professional who has come into contact with the child files a report. Specific professionals, including physicians, nurses, and teachers, are legally required to file when a child's symptoms raise suspicion of abuse. The report is then investigated further. The mandated reporters are specifically directed not to investigate further independently, but merely to report any condition that engenders suspicion (Berliner, 1993).

Reported child abuse rates vary widely according to race. In 1999, the reporting rate was highest for African-American children at 25.2 per 1000, double that for Hispanic children (12.6 per 1000). White children were reported at a slightly lower rate than Hispanics (10.6 per 1000), and Asian-Americans had the lowest reported rate of the largest ethnic groups, 4.4 per 1000 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2001). Although these statistics show dramatic differences in reported cases based on race, they do not make it clear why the differences occur.

There are at least three mechanisms that might account for the observed disparities in reporting rates. On the surface, the data might suggest differential abuse rates, perhaps rooted in cultural patterns of child-rearing. On the other hand, there may be judgmental biases among the designated professionals; they may apply stereotypes, perhaps unwittingly, when deciding whether an ambiguous case is really abuse (Turbett & O'Toole, 1983). A variant of this argument is that disadvantaged groups are more likely to make use of public institutions, such as schools and hospitals (Winefield & Bradley, 1992), than of private facilities. In public institutions reports are the norm, whereas professionals working in private facilities may suppress doubtful cases. Perhaps the mandated reporters in private facilities are more concerned about financial consequences when considering whether to report paying clients, even though good-faith reports are shielded from criminal and civil liability (McEvoy, 1990).

In this study, we chose teachers as our participants. There were several reasons for this choice. Teachers have the greatest opportunity to see children on a daily basis and to monitor the subtle physical and behavioral changes that may accompany child abuse. Because they are around children for a large amount of time, they develop a relationship of trust, so that children may be more willing to tell them about their abuse or about that of a child in their class (Tower, 1999). Education personnel made the largest number of reports of suspected child abuse in 1999 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2001). Reports of abuse from mandated sources such as teachers have a significantly higher substantiation rate than those reports from non-mandated sources (Powers & Eckenrode, 1988).

At the heart of the judgmental process, there is a detection issue. The teacher must determine from physical and behavioral evidence that something untoward has occurred. As signal detection theorists (Green & Swets, 1966; Swets, Dawes, & Monahan, 2000) have made clear, expectations regarding stimulus probabilities and consequences of the possible responses influence the perception of an ambiguous stimulus. Teachers may have prior notions about the likelihood that particular

children may be victims, and they may also have concerns about the consequences of expressing opinions regarding abuse. These biases may separately affect perceptions of abuse.

After determining that the child has been abused, the teacher then needs to decide whether to report. This second decision can, but need not, follow the first. Therefore, we experimentally separated the two judgments, i.e. whether abuse has occurred and whether the child should be reported as abused. Although reporting is legally required when abuse is suspected, the latter decision entails risk of legal consequences (Bavolek, 1983) as well as bureaucratic effort (Abrahams, Casey, & Daro, 1992). The teacher might feel that more evidence is required to justify a report rather than merely to have an opinion (Beck, Ogloff, & Corbishley, 1994; Zellman, 1990). Only within a laboratory study is it feasible to explore this issue systematically. Previous laboratory research has found that participants tend to recognize abuse more readily than they report it (O'Toole, O'Toole, Webster, & Lucal, 1993; O'Toole, Webster, O'Toole & Lucal, 1999).

Racial stereotypes are a familiar mechanism for generating differential subjective probabilities. If the teacher believes that a particular racial group is more likely to engage in a culturally prescribed pattern of abuse, then a child from that group may be more likely to be seen as abused than a child who exhibits identical symptoms but is from a different group. We considered two ways in which this prejudice might show itself; either as a main effect of the child's race, in which teachers as a whole agree upon differential abuse rates, or as an interaction, in which children from the teacher's own racial group are seen as less likely to be abused than children from other groups. In a previous laboratory study of teachers, O'Toole et al. (1999) reported a different racial main effect, that of the race of the participant. They found that White teachers were less likely than non-Whites to recognize and say they would report abuse.

In order to explore these hypotheses, we recruited teachers from three racial groups and had them evaluate a hypothetical child from one of the same three groups. Our emphasis on the sensitive issue of race meant that special experimental care was required in order to hide this variable from the participants. Participants were run in groups, and were guaranteed anonymity in order to increase the likelihood of honest responding regarding an issue they might see as delicate (Ong & Weiss, 2000). We employed an independent groups design, so that each teacher made a judgment about only one child. The child's symptoms were described in a written profile. Information about race was provided only implicitly, via a picture and the child's name. This way of presenting information mirrors real life more accurately than one that employs labels.

Because we were concerned about the logical connection between the two decisions involved in a report, we asked each participant to make only one judgment about abuse. Our fear was that once a teacher has committed to the position that the child is abused, subsequently asking whether the teacher would report that

abuse is akin to examining professional competence. Therefore, the key response was the participant's expression of the extent of agreement with either a statement that the child is being physically abused or a statement that the child should be reported as being physically abused. In order to downplay our emphasis on the abuse issue, we embedded this item within a list of six other statements about the child described in the profile.

The influence of probabilities and outcomes will be minimal when there is little ambiguity in the stimulus (Green & Swets, 1966). We manipulated the degree of physical abuse within the profiles, anticipating greater effects of race for a child exhibiting moderate symptoms of abuse than for one with symptoms of severe abuse. The main effect of this variable serves as a manipulation check, confirming the efficacy of the profiles in conveying abuse.

METHOD

Design

A $3 \times 3 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial design was utilized in this study, with four independent variables. The first independent variable was race of the participant (teacher), which had three levels: White, Black, and Hispanic. Participants were selected if they indicated that they were White, Black or Hispanic in the section that asked for demographic information. The data from volunteers who did not fall into one of these groups were not used. The second factor, race of the child, was made up of three levels and was represented by a picture of a child that was: White, Black or Hispanic. The third independent variable, severity of abuse, had two levels: moderate abuse and severe abuse. In selecting these levels, we were conscious of what Gelles (1975) referred to as obvious or outrageous abuse. Both of our levels comprised symptoms that could have arisen from accidents (Tower, 1999). The fourth factor, type of judgment, was made up of two levels: recognition of abuse, and reporting of abuse. The dependent variable was the response that participants gave to the statement that measured recognition or reporting.

Participants

The teaching experience of the participants in the study ranged from 1 month to 30 years, with a mean of 3 years. Sixty percent were elementary school teachers, and 63.5% were female. Their mean age was 33 years. All were currently taking credential or graduate classes in the School of Education at one of five universities in Southern California. With the cooperation of the instructors, we recruited students in those classes. Everyone in a class was invited to participate, but we could not ascertain the race of the volunteer until after the questionnaire had been

collected. Because there were 12 experimental combinations to be assigned to participants of specific races, and each questionnaire comprised a particular combination, we had to collect more questionnaires than we used. We analyzed only the questionnaires contributed by the first 15 White, 15 Black, and 15 Hispanic volunteers who happened to receive each of the 12 combinations, thus yielding 540 participants in all.

Materials

The profile of the student was handwritten to look like a teacher's note. It contained dated entries about the student's performance and activities in class. Race of the child was varied by having a picture of a boy who was White, Black or Hispanic. The picture was placed in the upper left hand corner of the profile. In addition, each child had a racially stereotypic name. The White child was Brad E. Whitman, the Black child was Terrell C. Jones, and the Hispanic child was Miguel P. Rodriguez. All other demographic information about the child was held constant. Note that race was never mentioned explicitly.

Abuse was either moderate (ambiguous) or severe (obvious). In the moderate abuse condition, there was one entry, which stated the child came to class with a scrape on his arm. In the severe abuse condition, there were two entries—one that stated the child came to class with a black eye and another that stated the child had a broken arm when he came to class. Characterizing these levels as "moderate" or "severe" abuse is arguable, but the labels are simply for convenience. No specific terms were conveyed to the respondents.

These entries (i.e., the ambiguous or obvious physical signs) were included along with other entries that showed behavioral changes over time. In the additional entries, the child was outgoing and doing well in class. Later, the child's grades fell and he became withdrawn from others. Then in the last entry, the child started to interact with people a little more and his grades began to improve. These additional entries were held constant in the moderate and severe abuse profiles. Prior to the study, two experts in the field of child abuse checked the profiles for credibility and accuracy.

Since pictures were used, prior steps were taken in order to control for physical attractiveness. First, a convenience sample of five adults examined a large set of pictures of eight-year old boys. From this set, they individually selected for each race three pictures that met three requirements (a total of nine pictures). The requirements were that the boys ranged in attractiveness from attractive to unattractive, were sitting in the same pose, and were smiling the same way. The three pictures from each racial group that were selected the most often were used.

Next, 45 teachers, not used in the study, were asked to rank the three children in the chosen pictures for a single race in terms of attractiveness. The teachers were partitioned into three subgroups of 15; members of the subgroups rated the

pictures of White children, Black children and Hispanic children respectively. The pictures that were most often ranked in the middle for each race were used in the experiment. A different group of 20 teachers, also not used in the study, was asked to identify the race of the selected pictures; all did so accurately.

Procedure

The researcher recruited volunteers at the end of a class session. Class members were informed they would read about a child and be asked to evaluate several statements about the child. They were also told that they would remain anonymous and their answers would be confidential. Almost all of the class members volunteered to participate. After completing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed.

Those who agreed to participate received a three-page packet. On the first page, we asked the participant to imagine being hired to replace a teacher, Ms. Bell, who was unable to return to her third-grade class. The second page contained the profile of a single student as described above. Participants were asked to read the profile carefully and to answer the questions presented on the third page.

On the final page, participants were instructed to express their degree of agreement with seven evaluative statements about the child and to provide demographic information about themselves. The fifth statement concerned either recognition (“This child is being physically abused”) or reporting of abuse (“This child should be reported as being physically abused”). The other six were filler statements whose topics were the child’s behavior and projected academic success, included so that the focus of the experiment would not be obvious. Participants responded to these statements on a Likert-scale from 1- *Strongly disagree* to 7- *Strongly agree*.

RESULTS

This study examined how race of the child, race of the teacher and severity of abuse influenced teachers’ recognition or reporting of child abuse. Only two of the four factors yielded significant effects—severity of abuse ($F(1,504) = 222.05$, $p < .01$) and type of judgment (i.e., recognition or reporting) ($F(1,504) = 5.87$, $p < .05$), along with their interaction ($F(1,504) = 11.50$, $p < .01$).

Thus, the results showed the expected significant main effect of severity of abuse, in that teachers who read a profile in which the child was severely abused were more likely to feel that the child was abused or should be reported as abused than teachers who read a profile in which the child was moderately abused. The overall mean for severe abuse, 5.29 ($SD = 1.55$), was almost 2 points higher on the 7-point response scale than that for moderate abuse, 3.35 ($SD = 1.51$).

Teachers were somewhat more likely to recognize abuse than to feel the case worthy of reporting. The overall mean for the recognition judgment was 4.47 ($SD = 1.57$), while that for the reporting judgment was 4.16 ($SD = 2.02$). The significant interaction between severity of abuse and type of judgment clarifies this rather small overall difference. When teachers received a profile of a child who was severely abused, there was only a slight difference between the mean for recognition, 5.22 ($SD = 1.33$), and the mean for reporting, 5.35 ($SD = 1.74$). However, when the child in the profile was moderately abused, the mean for recognition was about $\frac{2}{3}$ of a point higher, 3.73 ($SD = 1.42$) than the mean for reporting, 2.97 ($SD = 1.51$).

No other significant main effects were obtained. In particular, there were no significant effects for race of the child, race of the teacher, or for interactions involving these race factors. Teachers' evaluations of whether a child was abused or should be reported as abused were not affected by race.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we employed an independent groups design, a design that we knew would be statistically inefficient. We made this choice in order to ensure that judgments would not be influenced by contrast effects, either for moderate vs. severe abuse or for recognition vs. reporting judgments. The design also helped us to minimize the chance that participants would realize that race was a focal factor in the study and thereupon edit their responses. We compensated for the inefficiency by recruiting large samples.

The results supported this decision. We generated sufficient power to detect the expected interaction between level of abuse and judgment type. In comparing judgment types, we were able to demonstrate that a mean difference of less than $\frac{1}{2}$ point on the 7-point response scale could produce a significant effect. Since the same error term was used for all tests, we are confident that the observed lack of race effects reflects a true characteristic of the behavior of the population from which we sampled.

The child in the scenario was always male, in deference to the fact that the majority of reported physical abuse victims in the 8–11 years age bracket are boys (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2001). Eliminating the gender factor limits the generalizability of the study, but previous scenario research has not found a gender effect.

The finding that race of the child does not affect judgments of abuse is consistent with previous research involving teachers (Turbett & O'Toole, 1983). Conversely, race of the teacher did have an effect in a previous study. O'Toole et al. (1999) found that White teachers were less likely to recognize and report abuse than Non-White teachers. A possible explanation of the disparity in results is that less than 7% of the 480 participants in the study by O'Toole et al. were Non-White.

With the small minority presence, sampling error may account for the race effect. In the present study, we had 180 teachers from each of the three races under consideration.

Considered with respect to the observed racial disparity in reported child abuse statistics, the lack of race effects in our results has societal importance. We acknowledge that a laboratory study may not generate the same feelings or behavior as a real classroom. Teachers in practice make judgments based on long-term observation, and have an opportunity to reflect prior to making a decision. Also, it is possible that teachers whose experience is in a multiracial metropolitan area might not be representative of the entire nation's teachers. But if we take the results at face value, teacher biases do not account for Black children being more likely to be reported as abused.

Because the observed incidence for abuse among Hispanic children is about half that for Black children, we consider the argument for differential observational opportunities within public facilities to require further scrutiny. That is, although minority children may be more likely to come into contact with professionals operating within public institutions than White children, data showing that Black children do so at a much higher rate than Hispanics are needed. For example, are students in Catholic schools less likely to be reported as abused than students in public schools?

Education personnel are responsible for 15% of the reported cases (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2001). Although this is the highest proportion of reports from a single professional group, most reports are filed by people from other groups. It may be that the observed differential abuse rates stem from biased reporting by other professionals. In previous studies, race of the child was a significant factor for physicians (Nalepka, O'Toole, & Turbett, 1981; Turbett & O'Toole, 1983) and for clinical psychologists and social workers (Hansen et al., 1997). These other professionals may not have had specific training comparable to that of our teachers.

The teachers who participated in the present study all had training in the detection of child abuse, as is required by California law (Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act, 2000). The efficacy of that training is evinced by their ability to detect abuse in even the moderate condition. The average response for that condition, at a level near uncertainty, suggests suspicion that abuse may have occurred. This is perhaps appropriate, as the symptoms were ambiguous. When the abuse was severe, the average response was considerably higher, reflecting the ability of the teachers to detect abuse when the signs were more blatant. The difference is hardly surprising and validates our selection of levels of abuse. Previous studies have found similar effects of abuse (Nalepka et al., 1981; O'Toole et al., 1993, 1999); indeed, a study that did not could hardly be published.

Effective training may enable teachers to go beyond racial stereotypes and realistically look for reliable symptoms of abuse. Our results leave open the disturbing possibility that in the natural environment, where symptoms are not factorially

controlled, Black children appear more often in abuse reports because they are more likely to be abused. A conclusion as powerful as this one requires corroboration by experiments with other professionals, as well as by direct observation outside of the laboratory.

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