

# Teacher race and gender bias: Perceptions of students' approach to learning affects grades

February 11 2020, by Colleen Sharkey

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A recent study, co-authored by a University of Notre Dame professor, shows how educators' racial and gender biases affect their assessments of students' academic skills based on noncognitive skills, which include behavior, class participation, self-discipline and interpersonal skills.

Using a national dataset, Calvin Zimmermann, assistant professor of sociology at Notre Dame and Grace Kao, Yale University IBM professor of sociology, examined how first-grade teachers' perceptions of students' approach to learning can affect how they rate those students' [academic skills](#).

The results of the study, published in January in the Du Bois Review: *Social Science Research on Race*, suggest that racial and gender biases regarding students' noncognitive skills—whether they meet or defy teacher expectations—affect teachers' overall perception of students' academic abilities, a previously overlooked area of consideration.

"In talking to teachers during this and other studies, it is clear that many of them care deeply about their students and [social justice](#) but they are also overburdened with administrative tasks, preparing for standardized tests and other demands of the job," Zimmermann said.

"Schools can do a better job of creating policies, practices, and support for teachers that will reduce racial and gender bias and subsequent inequities. Rather than a one-day training, this should be a routine practice."

In one unidimensional analysis—only looking at race—the researchers found that, when compared to [white children](#) with identical noncognitive skills and [test scores](#), teachers penalize black children in math and advantage Asian children in literacy. When Zimmermann and Kao conducted their gender analysis (without considering race), they concluded that teachers penalize [girls](#) in both math and literacy.

They found that, despite similar test scores, similar school environments (based on socio-economic profile, namely percentages of students eligible for free or reduced lunch and percentages of non-white students) social circumstances and [behavior](#), disparity in assessment persists. For

example, researchers found that even if [black children](#) share a below-average assessment in noncognitive skills with their white peers, it is only the black students who are penalized in math. The same behavior results in different outcomes based on race. Asian students with less-than-exceptional noncognitive skills tend to be rated high in literacy when compared to their white peers.

Adding gender to the study indicates that black girls and boys are rated differently in math. When black girls' learning behaviors (noncognitive skills) are less than stellar, teachers are more likely to rate them as below average in math. Black boys with excellent behavior are less likely to be rated above average in math. Asian girls and Latino girls are not penalized in math compared to white boys when they have the same noncognitive skills, but black and white girls are. Regardless of their learning behaviors, white girls are less likely to be rated above average in math.

Regarding literacy, Asian girls are more likely than white boys to be rated below average when their learning behaviors are below average, but this does not apply to Asian boys. When white girls' cognitive skills are below average, they are more likely to be rated low in literacy. However, if white girls display stellar noncognitive skills, they are more likely than white boys to be rated above average in literacy.

Zimmermann and Kao also analyzed how racial/ethnic minority girls fared when compared to white girls. Even if Asian, black and white girls share identical below-average noncognitive skills, it is only the Asian and black girls who are more likely to be rated below average in math. Even if Asian girls' learning behaviors are slightly below average, average or above average, they are advantaged over white girls by being more likely to be rated above average in [math](#). On the other hand, regarding literacy, Asian girls who exhibit below-average noncognitive skills are penalized as compared to their white girl peers. If, however, Asian girls have

average learning behaviors, they are slightly advantaged over their white girl peers. Interestingly, Asian girls with above-average noncognitive skills are penalized more than white girls.

"Our findings might seem counterintuitive as scholars agree that girls and women currently outperform boys and men in terms of noncognitive skills, educational achievement and educational attainment," according to the study.

"Yet, as girls of three out of the four racial/ethnic categories are penalized, albeit in different ways, it appears that teachers hold girls and boys of different racial/ethnic backgrounds to different behavioral standards."

**More information:** Calvin Rashaud Zimmermann et al. UNEQUAL RETURNS TO CHILDREN'S EFFORTS, *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* (2020). [DOI: 10.1017/S1742058X20000016](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X20000016)

Provided by University of Notre Dame

Citation: Teacher race and gender bias: Perceptions of students' approach to learning affects grades (2020, February 11) retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-02-teacher-gender-bias-perceptions-students.html>

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