

Study highlights ties between racism and activism in black youth

September 8 2020, by Matt Shipman



Black Lives Matter march in Washington, DC, on June 6, 2020. Credit: Clay Banks

A new study from North Carolina State University and the University of Virginia finds that experiences with racism are associated with increased social consciousness and social justice activism in Black youth.

"There are many reasons that people become activists on social justice

issues, but anyone who is familiar with the civil rights movement of the 1960s could tell you that [racism](#) drove activism," says Elan Hope, corresponding author of the study and an associate professor of psychology at NC State. "However, there has been almost no research on how racism drives activism, especially for young people. There is also little or no research on the extent to which racism is influencing activism right now—and the subject seems both timely and important."

To explore these issues, the researchers conducted an in-depth survey of 594 Black adolescents from across the United States. The study participants were between the ages of 13 and 18, with a median age of 15.

Study participants were asked about their experiences with three different types of racism—individual, cultural and institutional—as well as how those experiences affected them. Individual racism includes racist behavior targeting an individual, such as referring to someone as an ethnic slur. Cultural racism is racism that is embedded in cultural norms, such as media representation of negative stereotypes. Institutional racism is often embedded in policies and regulations, and includes racist behaviors and attitudes found in established institutions—such as police questioning a Black person simply for being in a white neighborhood.

The researchers found 84% of study participants had experienced at least some form of racism.

Study participants were also asked a series of questions aimed at assessing the extent to which they perceived inequality in the systems around them; the extent to which they believed they were capable of changing those systems; and the extent to which they had taken action to change the relevant systems. These three factors correlate to critical reflection, critical agency and critical action, which are the three elements of a social concept called critical consciousness, which aims to

explain what is necessary for individuals and communities to seek change in an unjust system.

To better understand the relationship between the different types of racism and three elements of critical consciousness, the research team developed three statistical models—one for each type of racism. And there were significant differences across forms of racism.

The researchers found that the more [stress](#) individuals reported from individual racism, the more likely they were to perceive inequality and the more likely they were to feel that they were capable of changing the systems that contributed to that inequality. The researchers also found an indirect relationship: that these increases in perceived inequality and critical agency were associated with an increase in action aimed at changing the oppressive system.

The more stress an individual reported from institutional racism, the higher the level of perceived inequality. However, there was no increase in critical agency; it didn't make people feel they could change the system. But it was directly tied to increased actions aimed at changing the system.

Increased stress from cultural racism was directly related to higher levels of perceived inequality, higher feelings of agency and more action aimed at changing the relevant systems. In addition, the higher levels of perceived [inequality](#) also contributed to taking action.

"In short, the relationships between all of these variables are complicated, but clear," Hope says.

"We know Black children are experiencing racism. We're optimistic that these findings can help us work with young people to not only find healthy ways of dealing with the stresses caused by racism, but also to

channel their energy into constructive efforts to change the systems causing those stresses in the first place."

The paper, "Relations between racial stress and critical consciousness for black adolescents," is published in the *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*.

More information: Elan C. Hope et al. Relations between racial stress and critical consciousness for black adolescents, *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appdev.2020.101184](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2020.101184)

Provided by North Carolina State University

Citation: Study highlights ties between racism and activism in black youth (2020, September 8) retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-09-highlights-ties-racism-black-youth.html>

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