

How the Stress of Racism Affects Learning

October 17, 2016

The Atlantic:

A recent study from Northwestern University corroborates Agostini's experience, suggesting that the stress of racial discrimination may partly explain the persistent gaps in academic performance between some nonwhite students, mainly black and Latino youth, and their white counterparts. The team of researchers found that the physiological response to race-based stressors—be it perceived racial prejudice, or the drive to outperform negative stereotypes—leads the body to pump out more stress hormones in adolescents from traditionally marginalized groups. This biological reaction to race-based stress is compounded by the psychological response to discrimination or the coping mechanisms youngsters develop to lessen the distress. What emerges is a picture of black and Latino students whose concentration, motivation, and, ultimately, learning is impaired by unintended and overt racism.

Emma Adam, a professor of human development and social policy at Northwestern and the study's senior author, said prior research had established racial differences in levels of cortisol—a hormone that increases when the body is stressed—between black and white youth, and linked this to the impact of discrimination. In the current research review, she and her co-authors set out to connect the dots. “We had observed these [dissimilarities] and knew that sleep and stress hormones have strong implications for cognition ... we also knew that there was a strong racial gap in academic attainment.”

Read the whole story: [The Atlantic](#)