



ANGER, EDUCATIONAL

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Teacher Trainees Are More Likely To Misread Black Children As Angry Than White Children

By guest blogger Ellie Broughton

Research has shown that Black people are particularly like to be victims of "anger bias", in which others incorrectly interpret their facial expressions as angry. Past studies have focused on adult faces – but now evidence shows that even young kids face such prejudice. A new study published in Emotion has found that teacher trainees more often misperceive primary-school-age Black children as being angry.

The team, led by Amy Halberstadt at North Carolina State University, asked 178 prospective teachers from training programmes in the southeastern United States to complete an emotion recognition task. The participants saw video clips of 72 children, aged 9 to 13, making facial expressions depicting six emotions (happy, sad, angry, afraid, surprised, or disgusted). The kids were divided equally by race (Black, White) and gender.

The trainees were asked to supply their best judgment about the emotion depicted in each face. In the first set of trials they just saw the very beginning of an emotional expression, but later saw a more fully created expression.

The team then assessed trainees' implicit bias via the child race Implicit Association Test (IAT), and explicit bias via a questionnaire (REACT) which asked participants to rate their agreement with prejudiced statements about how race affects student behaviour, such as "Black students don't study very much". (Although the IAT has previously been criticised as a measure of "implicit" attitudes, the main findings of the new study don't rely on this measure).

Teachers had fair accuracy at detecting emotions, but in both White and Black children, boys were more often misread as looking angry when showing other facial expressions. (The sample of teachers, which reflects typical trends in the profession, was 89% female).

As predicted, Black boys were misperceived as angry more often than White boys, and Black girls were more often misperceived as angry than White girls. Surprisingly, higher levels of bias (implicit or explicit) did not actually increase the likelihood that Black children would face anger bias, but instead decreased the likelihood that teachers would misperceive White children to be angry.

The authors hypothesise that for the trainees, understanding children's emotions "may intersect with the racial biases teachers have acquired through living in a culture in which racial stereotypes are well-embedded", leading them to mistake Black children as angry when they're not.

This could have two significant consequences, they write. Misperceived anger that leads to a teacher punishing a child can disrupt their education, while anger is also "emotionally contagious" so could lead to a teacher becoming angry themselves.

The research adds to some other studies which have also found evidence of racial biases in teachers. A previous US study, for example, found that in an early years classroom teachers gazed longer at Black children, especially Black boys, while looking for "challenging behaviors".

Halberstadt says she hopes this research will ultimately help to develop better interventions to combat racialised biases. "Racialised bias is known to every Black family in the United States. When I talk with colleagues and friends, groups and families, people nod their heads: 'Yes, we know this. What's new?'" This study was designed to demonstrate the existence of this bias to White people and other researchers, she explains.

She's also keen to expose other racial prejudices besides the anger bias: "We want to keep our eyes and ears open to what other phenomena are being imposed by ... culture and by White people on others because of stereotypes. So the next question is, 'What are other biases that we have that we haven't become aware of?'"

In the UK, researchers from the Centre For Education and Youth (CFEY) have found that teachers in London show biases against Black Caribbean boys and White boys from poorer backgrounds. This affected not just disciplinary measures at school (for example, they were more likely to be expelled), but also assessment, such as which academic ability stream students were put in.

Ellie Mulcahy, head of research at CFEY, says the findings of Halberstadt's study are very concerning: "While this is a US study, and more research is sorely needed in the UK context, we know that racial bias is a problem in the UK." Currently, we have no idea how early in their education Black children in UK nurseries and schools encounter bias from teachers. Isn't it time to find out?

-Racialized Emotion Recognition Accuracy And Anger Bias Of Children's Faces

Post written for BPS Research Digest by Ellie Broughton (@_ellie). Ellie is a freelance features writer with work published in The Guardian, The Independent and Vice.

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One thought on "Teacher Trainees Are More Likely To Misread Black Children As Angry Than White Children"

Helen McDowall says: August 7, 2020 at 2:48 pm

Another WEIRD piece of 'research'. What race were the trainee teachers? Could it not be explained by cultural differences in perception of emotion?

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