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Ethnic Variations in Levels of Conventional Bonding among Different Black Adolescents in the United States: Implications for Behavioral Resilience

Abstract

The quantitative study offers a description of how Caribbean-descended and African American adolescents in a national sample compare on strands of Hirschi's conventional bond in terms of deviance and justice system involvement. Using a sample of 1,141 adolescents from the National Survey of American Life-Adolescent data, these groups were compared with tests of significance. The results indicate that belief and attachment are the most significant predictors of justice system contact. While Caribbean youth reported more deviance, this was not predictive of more justice system involvement than African Americans. Explanations for these findings and practice implications are offered.

Ethnic Variations in Levels of Conventional Bonding among Different Black Adolescents in the United States: Implications for Behavioral Resilience

Introduction

The United States continues to be a very diverse place in specific areas. Within races, there are often several ethnic and national variations. In terms of youth well-being, this study is an effort to look at some differences among people of the same race in terms of conventional social control or bonding (Hirschi, 1969) and implications for behavioral resilience. It recognizes that Blacks in the United States are not ethnically homogeneous. The focus is on Black adolescents in the United States given the over representation of Blacks in the United States justice systems. Data for 2016 indicate that Black youth accounted for 35% of juveniles taken into law enforcement custody while constituting only 15% of minors in the United States (Puzzanchera et al., 2017). In 2020, the incarceration rate was 383 per 100,000 for Black youth versus 83 per 100,000 for White youth; thus Black youth incarceration is almost five times that of Whites in the United States (Rovner, 2021).

Of the 40 million Blacks in the United States, 4.4 million are foreign born (Pew Research Center, 2019). Foreign-born Blacks accounted for 8.7% of Blacks in the United States in 2013 and are projected to be 16.5% of Blacks by 2060 (Pew Research Center, 2015). From 2013 Census data, half of the Black immigrants in the United States were from the Caribbean with most being from Jamaica (18%), followed by Haiti (15%) (Pew Research Center, 2015); nevertheless, the fastest growing group of Black immigrants in recent years has been from countries in Africa. The fact that immigrant Blacks are less likely to be poor than US-born Blacks (20% to 28%) and are more likely to have a college degree than US born Blacks (26% to 19%) (Pew Research Center, 2015) suggests that the adolescent off-spring of immigrant Blacks are likely to have stronger conventional bonds than their US-born Black peers, and in turn, less

contact with the justice system. Nevertheless, there is a need to empirically examine within race differences in terms of resilience to inform efforts to effectively target intervention and prevention approaches to diminish youth deviance. Thus, this study looks at whether Caribbean and African American descended adolescents differ significantly on elements of the bond, and what aspects of the bond are most predictive of justice system involvement for each group. The literature is sparse on these within race variations in the juvenile justice system, but effective responses involve understanding who system clients are and their perceptions of their circumstances.

Literature

There is a need to understand both what puts youth **at risk** for delinquency and the factors that engender **resilience** against delinquency. Risks refer to hazards that could be internal to the individual or external in his or her environment that increase the likelihood of negative outcomes (Cowen, 1983). The younger the children are when internal risks are evident, the more likely the child is to have problems in adolescence (Hawkins et al., 1987). The adolescent years in the United States render many young people at risk for delinquency, including substance abuse (Hawkins et al., 1987) and academic failure (Dryfoos, 1990).

The risks for many youth include exposure to violence, trauma, stress, a lack of basic resources and emotional support while experiencing various forms of oppression (Lee et al., 2012). The risks could be a result of dynamics in the home, the conduct of close peers accessible to the minor, and community factors, such as exposure to violence. On the other hand, Lee et al. (2012) characterized resilience as consisting of internal and external protective elements against life's adversities toward positive youth outcomes. They mentioned that the most recent literature indicates support for the conclusion that youth resilience is often the impact of effective bonding

that includes both attachment to parents or guardians and the child or adolescent's commitment to conventional, prosocial ideals to which these persons subscribe. The latter includes a commitment to school. For the most part, a weak social bond has been found to be predictive of delinquency. For example, Li (2004) examined self-control and social bonds effects on delinquency for a national sample. He found an interaction effect where low self-control and weak bonds were predictive of delinquency. Gardner and Shoemaker (1989) used a multivariate analysis to examine social bonding on delinquency. They found a negative relationship between the strength of a bond and delinquency especially for rural youth, while stronger connections to peers were predictive of delinquency. The influence of race was inconclusive, but social bonding seemed less predictive of delinquency for Blacks than for Whites. In 1995 however, Weber, Miracle and Skehan found cultural differences in the relationship between the bond and delinquency. For a sample of middle school African American, Hispanic and White children, they referenced the literature in declaring that the characteristics of bonds and related family experiences vary per race and ethnicity, including regarding cultural assimilation. They found the supervision of an adult female was more significant than attachment to a male adult. This supports previous literature indicating stronger direct maternal influences on child outcomes than male paternal influences (Hoeve et al., 2012). For Hispanics, intimacy in communication with a female adult was related to less delinquency. Caribbean youth, however, have appeared more vulnerable to mental health symptoms when faced with perceived high levels of discriminatory experiences (Mouzon & McLean, 2017; Seaton et al., 2008), perhaps given less preparation than African Americans to address these circumstances. These experiences seem likely to impact the belief aspect of Hirschi's bond.

Peguero et al. (2014) examined Educational Longitudinal data on 10th graders representing different generations. They found that school bonds seem to diminish with youth assimilation. As Black immigrants enter the United States and have similar experiences as Black Americans, many of them develop similar paradigmatic ideas as their United States counterparts. Given that immigrant perceptions and behaviors change over time with the effects of deeper assimilation and acculturation of each generation in the United States, differences in crime rates between US-born and foreign-born persons diminish with each generation in the United States (Morin, 2013). This study will capture some of these dynamics for second generation Caribbean immigrants.

The theoretical framework for this comparison study is Hirschi's bonding theory (1969). The theory focuses on school, a considerable part of youth life. It also has substantial empirical support. It posits that a youth's attachment to parents, commitment to school, involvement in conventional activities such as academics and sports, and a belief in the conventional bond as evidenced by obeying rules will lead to positive outcomes and reduce the odds of negative involvement with the justice system. Overall, the power of the conventional bond exists in its restraint. A positive attachment to a parent or guardian is likely indicative of a more authoritative parenting style, which offers children clear and consistent standards of conduct in a warm relationship (Riley, 1994).

To build on existing knowledge, the aim of this study is to describe any differences between Caribbean and African American Black adolescents on the strength of conventional bonds. It is recognized that the influence of elements of the bond are likely a small part of the total elements contributing to positive outcomes for adolescents. Understanding ethnic variations

are important. This should be informative to programming efforts to reduce juvenile deviance. It recognizes ethnic variations amongst Blacks in the United States.

Method

The study offers a quantitative description of the relationship between elements of the conventional or social bond, that is, attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief, as they vary between Caribbean and African American Black adolescents in the United States in terms of an outcome of negative involvement with the justice system. The National Survey of American Life-Adolescent data are from a national sample. Herein data are analyzed for 1,141 participants in the survey, 789 (69.1 %) were African American, and 352 (30.9%) were Black Caribbean, ages 13 to 17. The survey's focus is on youth mental health. The data were collected from 2001 to 2003 in face-to-face interviews lasting over 2 hours. This was done by interviewers who matched the respondents demographically. In this study, males and females are compared on the aspects of the bond. Male participants from the African American sample made up 48.9% (386), and 51.1% (403) for the females. On the other hand, 45.5 % (160) from the Black Caribbean group were males and 54.5% (192) were females. The research questions are: 1) Do Caribbean and African American descended adolescents differ significantly on elements of the bond? 2) what aspects of the bond are most predictive of justice system involvement for each group?

Measures

The National Survey of American Life -Adolescent (NSAL-A) data includes demographic factors such as age, sex, and ethnicity. Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics for all the measures utilized. The sample was closely divided between male and females participants (47.9% males and 52.1 % females; Mean = .52, SD = .500). The respondents had a mean age of

15 with 1.422 standard deviation. Ethnicity was measured according to the ethnic group of the adolescents' descendants. The groups include African Americans coded 0 and Caribbean Blacks coded 1. The other variables in the study were operationalized as:

Attachment was measured with a five scale item including “can tell mom anything”, “respondent can share feelings with mom”, and “respondent and mom have good relationship”, “mom always there when need her”, “respondents and mom can share problems”. The options were Likert items of strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree. For the analysis, the five items were averaged together, with higher values representing greater attachment to mom ($\alpha = .878$).

Commitment was measured by hours spent in academics each day after school with one hour or less = 0 or “not committed”, and more than one hour = 1 or “committed”. The mean as shown in table 1 is 1.11 and SD is 1.445.

Involvement referred to time in years doing sports, music, school paper, school clubs with a “yes” to any of these = 1; no = 0

Belief was indicated by an affirmative response on a Likert measure of the statement “Good grades are important,” and “Respondent tries hard at school”. The response category for this variable was very, somewhat, not very, and not at all. For the analysis, the two items were averaged, with higher values representing strong belief ($\alpha = .581$).

Deviance was measured using a single “yes” or “no” question “Did you ever go through a period during your childhood or teenage years when you did any of these things (Lie/steal/break rules childhood/adolescence)?” The mean was 2.99 and standard deviation was 2.001 as shown in Table 1.

Justice system contact is a binary categorical outcome variable. It was measured using a single “yes” or “no” question “Have you ever spent time in a reform school, detention center, jail, or prison?”

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for the sample ($N= 1141$)

Variable	M	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Adolescent age	15.03	1.422	13	17
Adolescent sex (0 = Male)	.52	.500	0	1
Adolescent ethnicity (0 = Afri Amer)	.31	.462	0	1
Attachment	9.03	4.139	5.00	25.00
Commitment	1.11	1.445	0	4
Involvement	3.159	3.383	.00	22.00
Belief	2.529	.875	2.00	8.00
Deviance	2.99	2.001	1	5
Justice system	4.72	1.028	1	5

Findings

The results indicate that 50.2% (573) were involved in deviant activities, of which 377 (47.8%) were African Americans, while 196 (55.7%) were Black Caribbean descendants (Table 2). Further, 81 (7.1%) of all participants indicated that they had spent time in a reform school, detention center, jail, or prison. From the 7.1%, 8.4% (66) were from the African American

group while 4.3% (15) were from the Black Caribbean group (Table 2). Thus, while a larger percent of Black Caribbean-descended youth self-reported more deviance than African Americans, it is possible that their life circumstances (that is, more likely to be in families that are less likely to be poor and more likely to have parents with a tertiary education) may have aided them in navigating away from being progressing into the justice system.

Table 2

Group difference on elements of bonds and deviance

Variable	African American	Caribbean
Attachment	82.7 %	75.5 %
Commitment	33.5 %	36.9 %
Involvement	41.6 %	42.8 %
Belief	97.1 %	97.1 %
Deviance	47.8 %	55.7 %
Justice System	8.4 %	4.3 %

*p < .05.

Regarding the first research question: Do Caribbean and African American descended adolescents differ significantly on elements of the bond? According to the results presented in Table 2, there is no significant difference between the groups for belief, as both groups have 97.1% at the .05 level. The other strands of the bonds (attachment, involvement, and commitment) differ by merely a few percentage points. Regarding the second research question: What aspects of the bond are most predictive of justice system involvement for

each group? Table 3 shows that attachment statistically significantly predicts justice system contact with a .006 significance value at the .05 p-value, and belief statistically significantly predicts justice system contact with a .001significance value. Nonetheless, the attachment strand is the best predictor because the Exp (B) is higher (.933) as opposed to belief (.710). Commitment (.601) and involvement (.616) do not statistically significantly predict justice system contact or involvement at the 0.05 p-value level of significance as measured in this study.

Table 3

Logistics Regressions: Analysis Summary for bonds predicting Justice System

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Attachment	-.069	.025	7.514	1	.006 *	.933
Commitment	.045	.086	.274	1	.601	1.046
Involvement	.019	.038	.251	1	.616	1.019
Belief	-.343	.105	10.649	1	.001*	.710

a. The reference category is: YES.

*p < .05.

Conclusion

The limitations of this study include that the data reflect static proxy measures. Thus, results could differ in other studies using different measures. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that the sample is large enough to give an accurate reflection of reality. Also, the strength of Caribbean cultural influence on each adolescent is not clear among the Caribbean-descended adolescents. This could vary by the number of Caribbean persons and the extent of cultural

exposure that the youth has, which was not evident in this study. Further, Kyere et al. (2020), using the same dataset, concluded that 33% of the respondents indicated having experienced teacher discrimination and that this had a negative relationship with school bonding. Teacher dynamics were not examined herein.

Overall, given that belief (as indicated by grades) and attachment (as indicated by relationship with mother) are the more internalized elements of the bond and the more impactful ones in this study suggests that whether youth offend is more a matter of what they think and feel regardless of any external efforts to keep them busy in terms of involvement or signs of commitment. This highlights the need to invest in young people's minds and hearts through quality interactions that change thinking as opposed to mere measures to keep them busy.

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