

Adolescents' experiences of ethnic discrimination in junior high school:  
Influence on academic and socio-emotional adjustment in high school

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Introduction

Developmental and educational psychologists have had a long-standing interest in studying the interplay between ethnicity and psychological development (e.g., McLoyd & Steinberg, 1999). Many different conceptual approaches have been used. By far, the most common approach in quantitative studies is the comparative approach. Research using this approach focuses on looking at whether there are ethnic group differences.

For instance, some developmental research examine whether there are ethnic group differences in outcomes, such as school achievement, mental health, and problem behaviors. Others look at whether there are ethnic group differences in the variables that predict these various developmental outcomes. Research using this approach have asked questions such as "Are there ethnic group differences in the influence of peers on adolescent substance use?" "Are particular parenting styles more predictive of better psychological outcomes for Whites than for ethnic minorities?" Another comparative approach that is to examine whether a single theoretical model is supported by data from different ethnic populations.

There is no doubt that research using the comparative approach have provided invaluable information about children and adolescents. However, ethnicity's influences on development include more than what is captured by ethnic group differences. It also include the diverse ways that ethnicity is integrated into the fabric of U.S. society, into children's and adolescents' different social environments, and into the psychology of the individual. In order for research to better capture the complexity of the interplay between ethnicity and individual's psychological development, it is necessary to study the different environmental, relational, and psychological components underlying ethnicity.

For example, one component of ethnicity that merits great attention is ethnic devaluation or it's more generally know as social stigma in the social psychology literature. Ethnic devaluation or ethnic stigma is defined as when in a particular context others place a negative

value on one's ethnic group membership. It includes many potentially troubling psychological situations, including experiences of prejudice and discrimination. Although there has been substantial discussion in the literature that prejudice and ethnic discrimination potentially have a powerful impact on the development of children and adolescents, there are, in fact, few published empirical articles, particularly quantitative ones, on this topic.

While there are few studies that have specifically examine the influence of ethnic discrimination on individual's psychological development, research on other areas of development indicate that experiences of ethnic discrimination may be a risk factor that potentially threatens the healthy academic and socio-emotional development of children adolescents. For instance, the developmental research generally shows that being in an uncaring and unsupportive environment where individuals do not feel a sense of relatedness is an important risk factor. One example of this comes from the work of Gary Ladd and his colleagues who have found that young children who are teased or picked on by their peers at school are more likely to do poorly in school, have low self-esteem, and feel lonely. A second example comes from the work of Kathy Wentzel and Jacque Eccles who have found that there is an increased probability for negative academic and socio-emotional outcomes when adolescents feel that their teachers do not respect or care about them as individuals. In a similar manner, ethnic discrimination by peers and teachers can convey to individuals that they are devalued and thus, these experiences are likely to increase the probability of poor psychological functioning.

The research in social psychology does in fact show that experiences of ethnic discrimination are risk factors for adults. These studies indicated that college students' and other adults' reports of ethnic discrimination at college and in the work place were associated with poor psychological adjustment, including low motivation, feelings of anger and depression, and poor performance in college or work. The few studies with adolescents also revealed that adolescents' experiences of ethnic discrimination in high school are associated with reports of low academic motivation and psychological distress

These prior studies have all focused on looking at the relation between experiences of ethnic discrimination and their concurrent psychological adjustment. There has been substantial research with children and adolescents that suggests that environmental risk factors may have long-term developmental effects. This means that risk factors during an earlier part in the lifespan may have a negative effect on individuals' psychological well-being later in time.

The focus of this study is to look at whether this is true of adolescents' experiences of ethnic discrimination. Specifically, we hypothesize that junior high school experiences of ethnic discrimination by teachers and peers are risks that potentially have long-term consequences. We examined whether junior high school experiences of ethnic discrimination was related to the academic and socio-emotional well-being in high school of African American and White adolescents.

Although ethnicity is seldom thought as major influence of Whites' psychological development, ethnicity may be relevant to Whites who are part of ethnically heterogeneous settings. It is important to keep in mind that while White adolescents may feel personal discrimination at school, these experiences may have a different meaning and influence on their development than on African-Americans' psychological well-being.

This hypothesis was examined using data from a large longitudinal study. The study is called The Maryland Adolescent Development in Context Study, and the P.I.s are Jacque Eccles and Arnold Sameroff.

## Methods

The families in the MADIC study were recruited based on parental willingness and a stratified sampling procedure designed to get proportional representation from each of the 23 junior high schools in the county. When this study began (See Table 1), the adolescents were just starting seventh-grade (1991). The adolescent and the primary caregiver were interviewed at home and they also completed a self-administered questionnaire. Then the adolescents and their primary caregivers were interviewed and filled out questionnaires again the summer following

the adolescents' completion of eighth grade (1993). The third time we interviewed and administered questionnaires took place when the adolescent was in the 11th-grade (Winter, 1996). The focus of this paper is on the data from Time 2 and Time 3.

The African-American and White families in this study were drawn from families across the full range of SES. This is unlike many studies where primarily African Americans from financially impoverished backgrounds are only included.

In addition, the adolescents attended schools in which the racial composition of the student body at each of the public junior high schools ranged from 99% African Americans and less than 1% Whites to 33% African Americans and 60% Whites. The racial composition of the teachers at the junior high school ranged from 25% African Americans and 70% Whites to 52% African Americans and 47% Whites.

This county is unique in that the African American and White residents of this county are of comparable sociodemographic background. For example, in 1995, 51% of the households were African-Americans and 43% were White. In 1995, Whites and African Americans had equal political control. In 1990, the median income for Whites was \$47,000 and \$41,000 for African Americans. The average level of education was similar for Whites and African Americans: 80% of African Americans and 80% of Whites had a high-school degree. 40% of African Americans and 40% of Whites had completed college.

In the next section, the measures used in this study are described. As for our outcome measures, we looked at multiple indicators of academic (See Table 2) and socio-emotional adjustment (See Table 3). All of these measures were internally consistent (Cronbach's alphas  $\geq$  .65). With respect to academic adjustment, we looked at the adolescent's personal importance of school, adolescent's perception of the utility value of usefulness of school for the future, adolescent's report of their disengagement or general apathy towards school, school grades, and parent's report of adolescent's academic motivation. In regards to socio-emotional indicators, we included both adolescent and parent report of depressive symptoms, anger, and problem behaviors (See Table 3).

Our measure of ethnic discrimination by peers included the following items.

- How often do you feel that you get in fights with some kids because of your race?
- How often do you feel that kids do not want to hang out with you b/c of your race?
- How often do you feel you are not picked for certain teams or other school activities because of your race?

The measure of discrimination by teachers included the following items:

- How often do you feel that teachers call on you less often than they call on other kids b/c of your race?
- How often do you feel that teachers grade you harder than they grade other kids b/c of your race?
- How often do you feel that you get disciplined more harshly by teachers than other kids do because of your race?
- How often do you feel that teachers think you are less smart than you really are because of your race?
- How often have you felt that teachers/counselors discourage you from taking certain classes b/c of your race?

In terms of the proportion of adolescents who felt discriminated against, 63% of the White adolescents and 64% of the African American adolescents reported experiences of discrimination at their junior high school (See Figure 1). 54% of the White adolescents and 49% of the African American adolescents reported experiences of discrimination at their high school. It is important to note that both Whites and African Americans are reporting experiences of ethnic devaluation in junior high and high school.

Figure 2 shows the breakdown in terms of whether they felt discriminated by peers or teachers 54% of the White adolescents and 39% of the African American adolescents felt discriminated by their peers in junior high school. 40% of the White adolescents and 59% of the African American adolescents felt discriminated by their teachers in junior high school.

46% of the White adolescents and 27% of the African American adolescents felt discriminated by their peers in high school. 32% of the White adolescents and 44% of the African American adolescents felt discriminated by their teachers in high school.

It's interesting to note that White adolescents reported more discrimination by peers and African American adolescents reported more discrimination by teachers.

Previously, we had mentioned that ethnic discrimination may mean different things for each ethnic group. We used multi-group confirmatory factor analyses to statistically test if our ethnic discrimination measures were tapping similar latent constructs. The results indicated that these ethnic measures were not tapping similar latent constructs across ethnic groups. These results are congruent with our initial beliefs that discrimination because your African American is not the same thing as discrimination because your White.

To examine the hypothesis that ethnic discrimination in junior high school is a risk factor that threatens psychological well-being in high school, we conducted partial correlational analyses in which we statistically controlled for gender, SES, academic competence (as measured by standardized test scores in elementary school), and psychological adjustment in junior high school.

#### Academic adjustment

The results of our analyses showed that for African Americans, junior high school experiences of discrimination was consistently related to multiple indicators of academic motivation (See Table 4). Perceived discrimination by teachers was also marginally related to school grades for African Americans. Perceived discrimination by peers was only related to school disengagement.

For the White adolescents, in general, perceived discrimination by teachers and perceived discrimination by peers were not related to academic adjustment.

#### Socio-emotional adjustment

As for the analyses of socio-emotional adjustment of African Americans (See Table 5), perceived discrimination by teachers was associated with adolescent report of problem behaviors, parent report of adolescent's depressive symptoms, and parent report of adolescent's problem behaviors. Perceived discrimination by peers was not related to either parent or adolescent report of psychological distress.

For the White adolescents, with the exception of parent report of problem behaviors, perceived discrimination by teachers was not related to indicators of socio-emotional distress

## Ethnic discrimination in junior high school

(See Table 5). Interestingly, perceived discrimination by peers was related to parent report of depressive symptoms, anger, and problem behaviors.

In summary, the results of these analyses revealed three general patterns. First, for African Americans, perceived discrimination by teachers in junior high school was statistically related to academic motivation and engagement in high school. Second, for African Americans, perceived discrimination by teachers in junior high school was statistically related to psychological distress in high school. Third, for Whites, perceived discrimination by peers in junior high school was statistically related to parent report of adolescent's psychological distress in high school.

In addition to partial correlation analyses, we conducted regression analyses to examine the cross-lagged relations between perceived discrimination and psychological outcomes. We were interested examining the cross-lagged relation for each of these 3 patterns that we found in the partial correlation analyses.

### African-American Adolescents

First, the relations between perceived discrimination by teachers and academic motivation were examined. Figure 3 shows the results of the analyses on the outcome variable of adolescent's personal importance of school. The results indicate that after controlling for perceived discrimination in junior high school, importance of school was not related to report of discrimination in high school. The relation between perceived discrimination in junior high school and personal importance of school in high school was significant.

Figure 4 examines another indicator of academic motivation, perception of the utility value of school. Again we see that prior motivation does not predict reports of discrimination in high school but prior experiences of discrimination in junior high school was predictive of later academic motivation in high school

This is also the case for school disengagement (See Figure 5). Adolescent disengagement from junior high school was not predictive of adolescent report of discrimination in high school.



However, experience of discrimination by teachers in junior high school was predictive of academic disengagement in high school.

What about the relation between perceived discrimination by teachers and psychological distress for African Americans? With respect to adolescent report of problem behaviors (See Figure 6), we see a different pattern of results from those pertaining to academic motivation. Perceived ethnic discrimination by teachers in junior high school was related to problem behaviors in high school. In addition, problem behaviors in junior high school was negatively correlated to reports of discrimination by teachers in high school. Interestingly, these results indicate that greater problem behaviors, as reported by the adolescent, was associated with report of less discrimination by teachers in high school.

If we look at our analyses with parent report of problem behaviors (See Figure 8), there was not this relation between prior problem behaviors and later reports of discrimination. In fact, parent report of adolescent's problem behaviors in junior high school was not related to adolescent's report of discrimination in high school. But perceived discrimination in junior high school was predictive of problem behaviors, as reported by parents, in high school.

As for parent report of adolescent's depressive symptoms (See Figure 7), the results indicate a pattern similar to the results for parent report of problem behaviors and adolescent report of academic motivation and school disengagement.

### White Adolescents

We looked at the cross-lagged relations between perceived discrimination by peers and parent report of adolescent's psychological distress for the White adolescents. Figure 9 shows that there was no relation between depressive symptoms in junior high school, as reported by parents, and adolescent report of discrimination by peers in high school. Only the relation between prior experience of discrimination by peers in junior high school parent report of adolescent's depressive symptoms was significant. A similar pattern of results was revealed when parent report of adolescent's problem behaviors was examined.

## Ethnic discrimination in junior high school

As for the outcome of anger, we found that both of the cross-lagged relations were significant. Report of greater discrimination by peers in junior high school was related to greater anger, as reported by parents. Anger, as reported by parents, was predictive of adolescent's report of discrimination by peers.

### Discussion

What are the implications of these findings? First of all, I want to emphasize that our findings show that our constructs of ethnic discrimination do not hold equivalent meanings for Whites and African Americans. This is important to keep in mind because some of the findings that are different for African Americans and Whites may be due the fact that these ethnic constructs are assessing something different for Whites and African Americans.

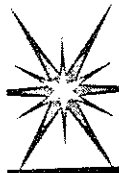
Next, ethnicity, in terms of ethnic discrimination, can influence White children and adolescents' development, too. In general, we have paid little attention to ethnicity in our research with White youth. However, as our population continue to increase in terms of its ethnic minority population, more White youth will be part of racially heterogeneous populations. This means that it will become increasingly important to study the role of "Whiteness" in our research with children and adolescents.

Another important finding of our research is that in racially heterogeneous junior high schools, there is considerable conflict and tension between individuals of different ethnic groups. Most of our research on the racial or ethnic climate of schools have focused on either high schools or college. The results of this study show that negative ethnic experiences take place in junior high or middle schools. Additional research is needed to assess the ethnic climate in ethnically heterogeneous elementary schools.

In fact, the results of this research indicate that it may even be more important to look at experiences of ethnic devaluation in junior high and elementary school. These experiences, particularly for African Americans and perhaps other ethnic minorities, have long-lasting influence on psychological development.

Perhaps the most important finding of this study is that adolescent's report of ethnic discrimination is not merely a function of their prior academic motivation and psychological distress. That is, the evidence in this study do not show that poor academic motivation and high psychological distress is being translated into attributions of ethnic discrimination. Nor do the evidence support the notion that peers' and teachers' poor treatment are in response to adolescent's poor academic motivation and psychological distress. Instead our results show that it is more likely the case that personal experience of ethnic discrimination is a risk factor that threatens the academic and socio-emotional well-being of adolescents.

In conclusion, the results of this study provide strong evidence that personal experiences of ethnic discrimination in school has potential deleterious effects on individuals' psychological development. Moreover, our findings indicate that all adolescents, regardless of ethnic or racial group, are at-risk for poor psychological functioning when they are subjected to negative messages about their ethnic or racial group membership. The findings of the present illustrate the necessity of doing more research on children's and adolescents' experiences of ethnic or racial devaluation.



## Table 1: Information about Data Collection

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### Time 1 (Fall, 1991):

- > Adolescents started 7th grade.
- > 897 African American and 460 White families

### Time 2 (Summer, 1993):

- > Adolescents completed 8th grade.
- > 625 African American and 334 White families

### Time 3 (Winter, 1996):

- > Adolescents were in 11th grade.
- > 579 African American and 279 White families
- > 433 African American and 240 White families participated in Time 1, 2, and 3.



## Table 2: Measures of academic adjustment

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- > Importance of school (2 items)  
Ex: Compared to other kids your age, how important is math to you?
- > Utility value of school (4 items)  
Ex: I have to do well in school if I want to be a success in life.
- > School disengagement (5 items)  
Ex: Most of your classes or subjects are boring.
- > School grades
  - > Junior high school grades are from school records & high school ones are from self-report.
- > Parent report of Y's academic motivation (5 items)  
Ex: How often does your 11th-grader prefer easy academic problems and courses?




**Table 3: Measures of socio-emotional adjustment**

- > Depressive symptoms (4 items)  
Ex: I am sad all the time.
- > Anger (3 items)  
Ex: During the last month, how often have you felt so angry you wanted to smash or break something?
- > Problem behaviors (9 items)  
Ex: In the past year, how often have you brought alcohol or drugs to school?
- > Parent report of Y's depressive symptoms (2 items)  
Ex: What are the chances your 11th grader will have psychological problems like depression?
- > Parent report of Y's anger (3 items)  
Ex: My 11th-grader seems to get angry easily.
- > Parent report of Y's problem behaviors (5 items)  
Ex: What are the chances your 11th-grader will get involved with drugs?



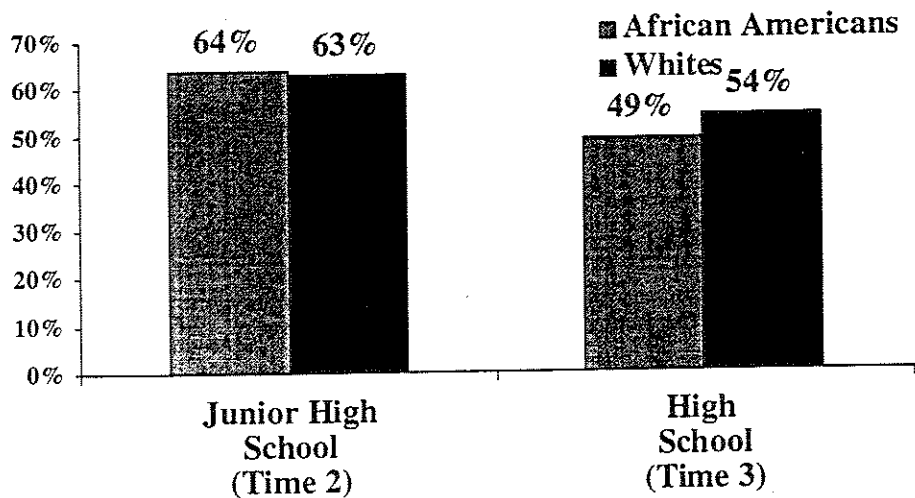
**Table 4: Experiences of Discrimination in Junior High School and Academic Adjustment in High School**

	African Americans		Whites	
	Discrim by Teachers	Discrim by Peers	Discrim by Teachers	Discrim by Peers
Personal importance of school	-.12*	-.01	-.01	-.04
Perceived utility value of school	-.22***	-.02	-.06	.01
School disengagement	.31***	.17***	.03	.11†
School grades	-.07†	.01	-.10†	.00
Parent's report of Y's academic motivation	-.03	.03	-.03	-.07

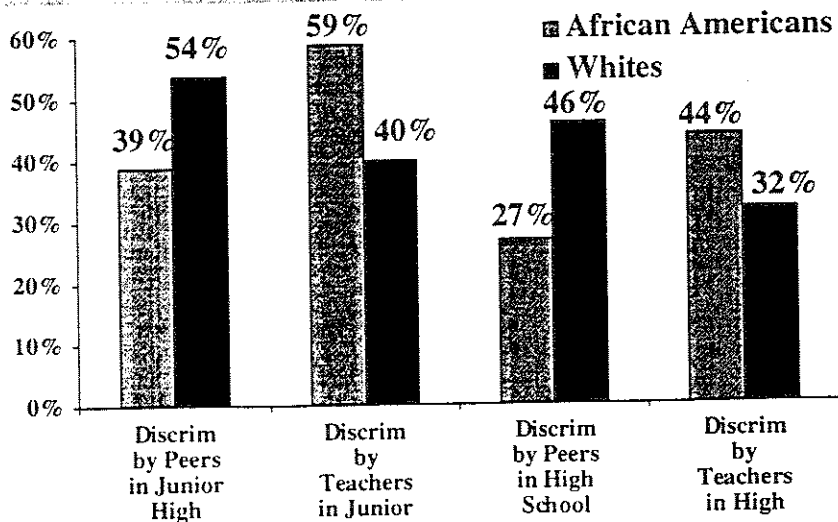
 **Table 5: Experiences of Discrimination in Junior High School and Socio-Emotional Adjustment in High School**

	African Americans		Whites	
	Discrim by Teachers	Discrim by Peers	Discrim by Teachers	Discrim by Peers
Depressive symptoms	.06	-.07	.01	.11†
Anger	.02	-.02	-.02	-.05
Problem behaviors	.15**	-.04	-.09	-.08
Parent report of Y's depressive symptoms	.11*	.03	.09	.20*
Parent report of Y's anger	.05	-.03	.09	.22**
Parent report of Y's problem behaviors	.13**	.03	.27***	.31***

**Figure 1: % of Adolescents who Reported Experiences of Discrimination at School**

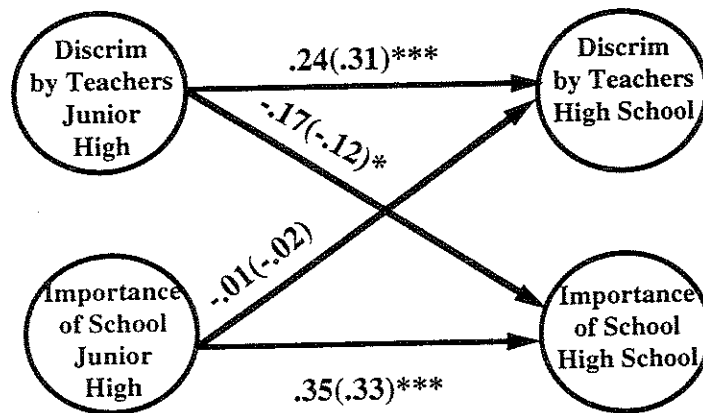


**Figure 2: % of Adolescents who Experienced Discrimination by Different "Sources"**

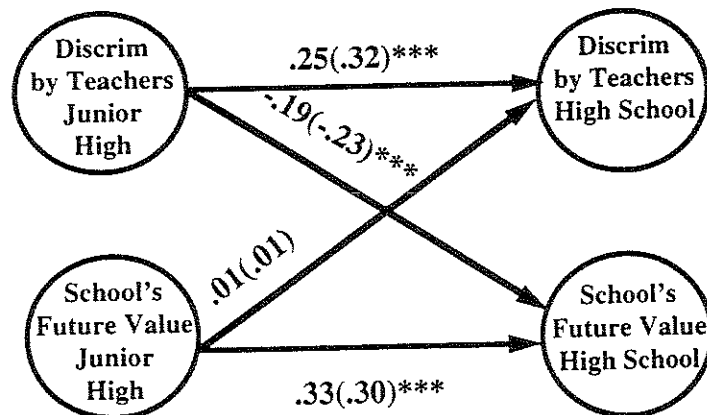




**Figure 3: Cross-Lagged Relations for African Americans: Discrimination by Teachers & Importance of School**

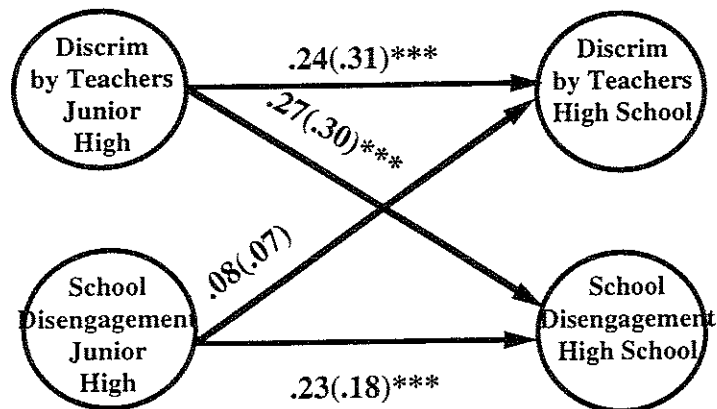


**Figure 4: Cross-Lagged Relations for African Americans: Discrimination by Teachers & School's Future Value**

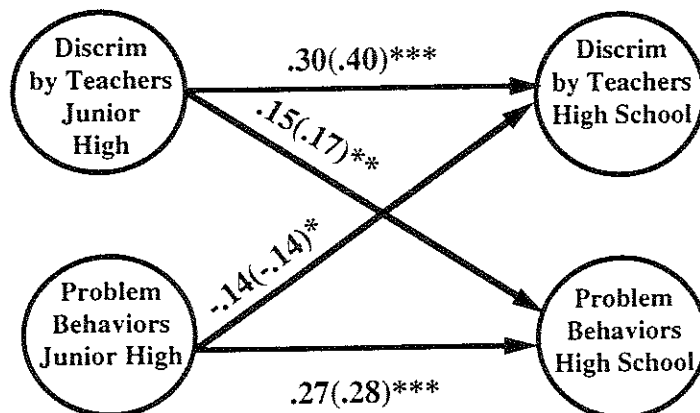




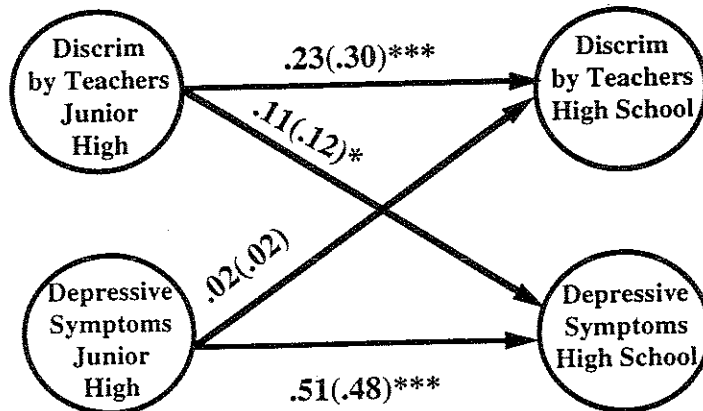
**Figure 5: Cross-Lagged Relations for African Americans: Discrimination by Teachers & School Disengagement**



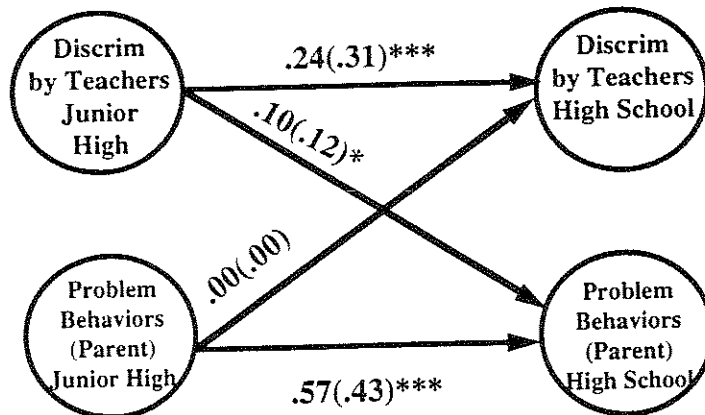
**Figure 6: Cross-Lagged Relations for African Americans: Discrimination by Teachers & Problem Behaviors**



**Figure 7: Cross-Lagged Relations for African Americans: Discrimination by Teachers & Parent Report of Adolescent's Depressive Symptoms**

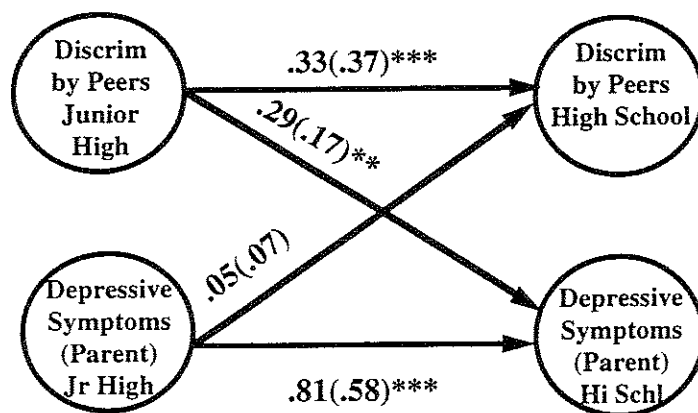


**Figure 8: Cross-Lagged Relations for African Americans: Discrimination by Teachers & Parent Report of Problem Behaviors**

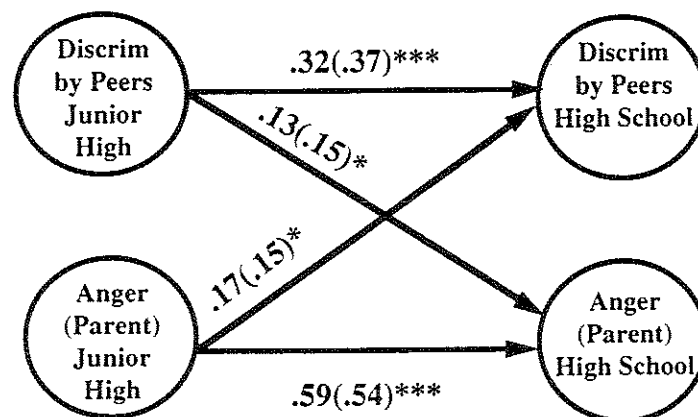




**Figure 9: Cross-Lagged Relations for Whites:  
Discrimination by Peers & Parent Report of  
Adolescent's Depressive Symptoms**



**Figure 10: Cross-Lagged Relations for  
Whites: Discrimination by Peers & Parent  
Report of Adolescent's Anger**





**Figure 11: Cross-Lagged Relations for Whites: Discrimination by Peers & Parent Report of Adolescent's Problem Behaviors**

