

Racial differences in internalizing and externalizing behaviors: Comparison among Black, Latinx, and Asian American youth

Caleb Kim *

School of Social Work, Loyola University Chicago, 820 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60611, USA.

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Abstract

This study examined racial differences in internalizing and externalizing behaviors among three racial minority youth in poor and disadvantaged urban communities in Chicago. Using the Youth Self-Report (YSR) on internalizing behaviors and externalizing behavior problems, this study analyzed a one-way between-subjects ANOVA and found no significant racial differences in internalizing behavioral problems among three racial minority youth. However, in externalizing behaviors, Black youth were in a precarious position of reporting more behavioral issues, particularly aggressive behavior and delinquency, than Latinx or Asian American youth. Latinx youth also showed a higher prevalence of delinquency in externalizing behaviors compared to Asian American youth group. Service providers who work with racial minority youth need to acknowledge racial differences in youth internalizing and externalizing behavioral issues. The findings suggest further research to identify other risk factors for racial differences in youth's emotional and behavioral problems.

Keywords: Minority youth; Racial difference; Externalizing behaviors; Internalizing behaviors; Aggressive behaviors; Somatic complaints

1. Introduction

Youth behavioral functioning is predictive of healthy developmental states, future adjustments (Bornstein et al., 2010), and achievement (McLeod & Kaiser, 2004). Developmental studies effortfully distinguish youth behavioral dysfunctions between internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems. Internalizing behavioral issues are characterized as an over-control of emotions with inwardly expressed mental health problems such as social withdrawal, depression, trauma, anxiety, inferiority, isolation, dependency, and stress (Bornstein et al., 2010; Kim-Ju et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2011). Externalizing behavioral problems refer to an under-control of emotions with a broad range of overt and disruptive behaviors, including temper tantrums, physical or verbal aggression, bullying, delinquency, arguing, refusing to comply with authority's directions, acting out aggressively and disregarding authority figures (Keil & Price, 2006; Liu, 2005).

Youth internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems are social and public health issues because they cause various psycho-social problems and continue into adulthood if they are unmitigated (Achenbach et al., 2003; Copeland et al., 2009). In particular, youth internalizing behavioral issues are strongly linked to depression, a lack of self-control, academic difficulties, and suicide in adulthood (Bornstein et al., 2013; Liu, 2005; Murray & Kochanska, 2002), while youth externalizing behavioral problems are correlated with early addiction of substance use (King et al., 2004), peer rejection (Aslan, 2018; Laird et al., 2001), and antisocial behaviors (McLeod & Kaiser, 2004).

Youth internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems also need to be recognized from racial and cultural contexts because of the intricate cultural nuances and complexity of youth behavioral problems (Anderson & Mayes, 2010; Chen,

* Corresponding author: Caleb Kim

2020; Loyd et al., 2019; Ocasio et al., 2022). For instance, Asian American parents tended to view hyperactivity in youth as more severe and problematic than their White counterparts because Asian cultures value submissive and quiet behaviors (Canino & Alegria, 2008; Chen & Liu, 2016). On the other hand, some Asian and Latinx cultures considered high anxiety a normal response to adapting to challenging social demands (Canino & Alegria, 2008).

Although Latinx and Asian Americans are the fastest-growing two minority populations in the U.S. (Frey, 2021), there is substantially less work examining racial variations in internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems among three primary minority youth limited range of age groups - Asian, Latinx, and Black. While some studies show discrepant findings of racial differences in youth behavioral problems, most studies compared only two racial groups or included a wide range of ages (Kistner et al., 2003; McLaughlin et al., 2007). The lack of comparison studies among three minority youth indicates a critical literature gap in understanding racial differences for improving appropriate mental health services fitting to racial and cultural contexts. Therefore, extending our understanding of racial differences in youth internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems among youth (age 12-18 years) in three aforementioned racial minorities can identify at-risk groups and suggest culturally sensitive prevention strategies to serve them effectively.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Data were collected from three community social service agencies located in poor and disadvantaged urban communities and several local schools in Chicago, targeting minority youth who were interested in participating in the Building Resilience Against Violence Engagement (BRAVE) community-based violence prevention program. The BRAVE program offers comprehensive violence prevention services such as case management, tutoring, group/family counseling services, community outreach, and summer camps.

The racial compositions of 211 youth participants were Black (male=45, female=48), Latinx (male=43, female=28), and Asian American (male=21, female=26). The ranges of participant's age were from 12 to 18 years and their average age was 13.4 years (Black=13.5, Latinx=13.2 and Asian American=13.3). All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the author's home institution.

2.2. Measures

The Youth Self-Report (YSR) (Achenbach, 1991; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2003) was used to measure youth internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems. The YSR is a highly reliable, validated self-report questionnaire to assess emotional and behavioral problems among youth ages 11-18. YSR has 119 items, including eight subscales of behavioral issues with a 3-point scale: items are rated as 0 (*not true*), 1 (*somewhat or sometimes true*), or 2 (*very true or often true*). The psychometric properties of the YSR assess internalizing behavioral problems measured by anxiety, depression, withdrawal, and somatic complaints, and externalizing behavioral problems measured by social problems, thought problems, rule-breaking behavior, and aggressive behavior. The validity, reliability and cross-cultural application of the YSR have been well documented (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001; Leung et al., 2006).

2.3. Analysis

A one-way between-subjects ANOVA was run with youth race as the independent variable and internalizing behaviors and externalizing behaviors as the dependent variables, respectively, in three racial groups - Black, Latinx, and Asian American youth. Tukey post hoc analysis was followed to confirm the results. Second, a one-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to check if race and gender were correlated with internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems. Lastly, repeated measures of a one-way between-subjects ANOVA were proceeded to compare scores on five identified subscales (i.e., withdrawn/depressed, somatic complaint, anxious/depressed, delinquency, aggressive behavior) of the YSR. The overall non-responsive rate was less than 9.5%. Using a single imputation procedure, the missing values were replaced with the variable mean score.

2.4. Results

As indicated in Table 1, there was a significant effect of youth externalizing behaviors on racial groups [$F(2, 195) = 3.53$, $p < 0.05$]. Yet, there was no association between the youth race on internalizing behaviors for the three racial groups [$F(2, 184) = 0.28$, $p = 0.621$]. Tukey post hoc analysis confirmed that Black youth ($n = 84$, $M = 10$, $SD = 6.3$) have significantly more externalizing behavior problems than Asian American youth ($n = 47$, $M = 7.81$, $SD = 5.05$); the Latinx youth were not significantly different from the other two racial groups.

Table 1 Race Differences in Youth Internalizing and Externalizing Behaviors

Variables	Mean Differences					
	N	Mean	SD	Latinx	Asian	F
Internalizing Behavior	188	17.31	10.3			0.28
Black	78	16.7	10.62	-1.3	-7.33	
Latinx	63	17.43	10.9		0.60	
Asian	47	17.31	9.01			
Externalizing Behavior	199	10	6.3			3.53*
Black	84	10.59	6.3	0.11	2.8*	
Latinx	68	10.48	6.8		2.7	
Asian	47	7.81	5.05			

The results suggested that the youth race has an effect on their externalizing behaviors. Specifically, findings indicated Black youth reported having more externalizing behavioral problems than Latinx or Asian American youth. About the correlation of race and gender with externalizing and internalizing behavior in three racial categories, this study found a significant effect of gender on internalizing behavior at $p < .001$ [$F(1, 181) = 14.92, p = .001$] but there were no significant effects of race and gender on internalizing behavior in three racial groups.

2.5. Race Differences in five subscales of the YSR

Among the five subscales, there was a statistically significant effect of race on three subgroup behaviors: Somatic Complaints, Delinquency, and Aggressive Behavior on racial groups: Somatic Complaints [$F(2, 202) = 3.40, p < 0.05$]; Delinquency [$F(2, 202) = 6.60, p < 0.05$]; Aggressive Behavior [$F(2, 197) = 2.94, p < 0.05$] (Table 2). Post-hoc comparisons using a Tukey HSD test confirmed three findings: 1) Black youth ($n = 88, M = 4.26, SD = 3.39$) have significantly more somatic complaints than Asian American youth ($n = 49, M = 2.92, SD = 2.32$) at the $p = 0.05$ level; 2) Both Black youth ($n = 90, M = 4.21, SD = 2.77$) and Latinx youth ($n = 68, M = 4.57, SD = 2.12$) have significantly more delinquency than Asian American youth ($n = 47, M = 2.74, SD = 2.10$) at the $p = 0.05$ level; and 3) Black youth ($n = 84, M = 6.69, SD = 4.0$) have significantly more aggressive behavior problems than Asian American youth ($n = 48, M = 5.0, SD = 3.24$) at the $p = 0.05$ level. The results suggested that the youth race is correlated with their behavioral problems. Specifically, the findings indicated that Black youth were at-risk youth with higher levels of aggressive behavior, delinquency, and somatic complaints, compared to Asian American youth.

Table 2 Race Differences in Subscales of Youth Behavioral Problems

Variables	Mean Differences					
	N	Mean	SD	Latinx	Asian	F
Withdrawn/Depressed	202					0.078
Black	88	6.90	3.43			
Latinx	66	6.70	3.04			
Asian	48	6.88	3.30			
Somatic Complaints	205					
Black	88	4.26	3.39	0.97	1.34*	3.40*
Latinx	68	3.29	3.34		0.38	
Asian	49	2.92	2.32			
Anxious/Depressed	195				2.52	
Black	84	6.16	5.82			

Latinx	64	8.19	6.79			
Asian	47	8.0	5.28			
Delinquency	205					6.60*
Black	90	4.21	2.77	-0.36	1.47*	
Latinx	68	4.57	2.12		1.83*	
Asian	47	2.74	2.10			
Aggressive Behavior	200					2.94*
Black	84	6.69	4.00	0.71	1.69*	
Latinx	68	5.99	4.09		0.98	
Asian	48	5.0	3.24			

3. Discussion

This study becomes a critical undertaking to understand the relationships between youth externalizing and internalizing behaviors and racial differences among three minority groups ages 12-18. Our findings indicate that race is strongly associated with behavioral problems among minority youth. Consistent with previous research (Anderson & Mayes, 2010; Loyd et al., 2019; McLaughlin et al., 2007), this study found that Black youth experienced more externalizing behavioral problems than other minority groups. Black youth reported experiencing a higher prevalence of aggressive behavior and delinquency as externalizing behavior and somatic complaints as internalizing behavior than Asian and Latino youth. The Tukey post hoc test confirmed that Black youth were in a precarious position of reporting more behavioral problems than Latinx or Asian American youth. Although Latinx youth did not show significance in overall internalizing and externalizing behavior, Latinx youth also showed a higher prevalence of delinquency in externalizing behavior at the $p < .05$ level compared to the Asian American youth group.

Notably, the results need to be interpreted with caution because cultural and contextual factors may substantially influence externalizing and internalizing behaviors among minority youth. For example, Asian American youth may be more reluctant to report problematic behaviors than other minority youth groups due to social desirability bias such as Confucianism's saving-face (e.g., avoiding the conflict and violent situations to maintain social harmony) and obedient and submissive behaviors to authority figures (Lau et al., 2006). Furthermore, previous research shows that Black youth in poor and violent-ridden communities are disproportionately exposed to domestic and community violence and, consequently, exhibit more behavioral problems than any other ethnic group (Aisenberg & Herrenkohl, 2008; Zimmerman & Messner, 2013). Consistent with previous studies, Black youth in the current study reside in severely violent-ridden urban communities than the other two minority youths so that they may be more susceptible to behavioral problems. In addition, it seems that the higher level of behavioral problems among Black youth may be legitimate survival strategies they learned unconsciously in everyday interactions (Kim et al., 2022). However, this study cannot answer whether this factor directly causes behavioral problems among Black youth. Still, it deserves future research to understand the relationship between race and youth behavioral issues in-depth. However, given the strong correlations among externalizing behavioral problems (Liu, 2005), the result of this study suggests that a comprehensive youth service addressing multiple externalizing behavioral problems concurrently (e.g., violence, substance abuse, delinquency, hyperactivity), rather than a single behavioral problem, is best served to prevent youth's externalizing behavioral problems.

This study is limited to a relatively small sample of minority youth in one area, which limits generalizability. Yet, the findings from concurrent comparisons of three minority youth show a need to develop racially and culturally appropriate violence prevention strategies. Specifically targeting advocacy and education in implementation efforts may increase the use of culturally diverse violence prevention programs for minority youth in disadvantaged inner-city communities. Such strategies demand the identification of risk factors leading to racial differences in youth behavioral problems. In future analysis of this sample, it is necessary to investigate whether other eco-systemic factors (such as parenting, peer relations, community safety, etc.) are associated with youth behavioral programs. Hence, future study should consider exploring the relationship between various eco-systemic factors and minority youth behavioral problems in full context.

4. Conclusion

The findings that race is correlated with youth behavioral problems have clinical and research implications. Service providers who work with minority youth may benefit from increasing awareness of racial differences in youth behavioral issues. For instance, Asian American youth may not necessarily be open to reporting their behavioral problems even when they may still experience psychological difficulties. At the same time, Black youth may complain of somatic symptoms as an indication of internalizing behaviors. Due to the complexities of externalizing and internalizing behavioral problems, service providers should be keen on holistically understanding the underlying meanings of youth behavioral problems. This suggests that service providers targeting minority youth should provide a comprehensive and culturally sensitive youth service program. Identifying systematic factors promotes developing micro-macro integrated services, which further propel a sense of pride in culture and diversity and empower them to become change agents in their community.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare

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