



## Racialized perceptions and child neglect<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This paper models racialized perceptions of child welfare workers and tests the hypothesis that these perceptions contribute to the racial disproportionality in reported and/or substantiated child maltreatment. A method is adopted which captures the salient features of racial stereotypes deriving from visual representations of neglectful situations that meet state definitions of child maltreatment and reportable offenses. Caseworkers are shown pictures of a neglectful situation that randomly varies with respect to whether a child in the picture is black or white or whether there is no child at all pictured. If things that “look black” are more likely to be perceived of by caseworkers as reportable offenses or to meet state definitions of child maltreatment than things that “look white,” then this indicates racialized perceptions. Data are collected from a sample of all caseworkers from every county in Minnesota for 2005.

Linear and logistic fixed effects models are estimated for the responses as to whether the situation in the picture meets the state definition and whether the offense is reportable. Independent variables include: the respondent's age, gender, and race; whether the respondent was born in the Twin Cities, majored in social work, was an intake worker, or worked in Hennepin County. The results show statistically significant impacts of the black baby vignette (compared to no baby or white baby) on the likelihood that respondents agree that the situation depicted in the picture meets the state definition of neglect and is reportable.

Also estimated are the impacts of these racialized beliefs on racial disproportionalities in reported and substantiated child maltreatment rates across counties. There are strong and statistically significant impacts of indices of caseworker racialized beliefs on racial disproportionalities in reported and substantiated maltreatment rates.

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### 1. Introduction

Regression models of discrimination in the child protective services borrow from conventional economic methods to measure and detect discrimination (Blinder, 1973; Gupta, Oaxaca, & Smith, 2006; Oaxaca, 1973). These methods derive from the premise that employers (or landlords or real estate agents or lenders or child welfare workers) are motivated by “tastes for discrimination” (Becker, 1957). Refinements consider instances where agents do not engage in intentional discrimination but, when faced with limited information or

uncertainty about such factors as employee productivity, risk of default, credit worthiness, or in the case of child welfare, “front-end risks,” engage in actions that nonetheless can produce disparate outcomes (Aigner & Cain, 1977; Arrow, 1973). A recurring criticism of these economic models of discrimination, however, has been that they fail to explain or to detail the causal mechanisms that produce the underlying racial biases, beliefs or racialized perceptions that putatively produce observed discriminatory outcomes.

Recent experimental work in both social psychology and economics has produced valuable insights into the formation and prevalence of certain types of racialized perceptions that can produce observed disparities in markets and economically relevant outcomes. Included in this literature are tests about the impacts of names, skin color, and other signals about the race of participants in labor markets or consumer markets (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Doleac & Stein, 2010; List, 2004; Nardinelli & Simon, 1990; Nunley, Owens, & Howard, 2010; Pope & Sydnor, 2011; Ravina, 2008). These field experiments can be criticized because, although they speak to the issue of whether racial discrimination exists, they leave largely unaddressed the question of how much of observed racial disparities can be

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explained by the experimental measures of racial bias. There is almost no recent economics literature establishing a clear relationship between measures of racial animosity or individual beliefs about racial inferiority and observed racially disparate market or non-market outcomes.

The foundations for economic modeling of what will be called in this paper “racialized perceptions” can be found in the work of researchers examining stereotype threat models where the social stigma of intellectual inferiority borne by certain cultural minorities can undermine their performance (Aronson, Quinn, & Spencer, 1998; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). This is related to the work of social psychologists who use implicit association tests where subconscious beliefs about subgroups surface in rapid response tests that require pairing or making comparisons (Gawronski, 2002; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998; Ottaway, Hayden, & Oakes, 2001). These works point to a possible mechanism underlying racially disparate outcomes. Racialized perceptions can produce both the initial disparities and the self-confirming evidence that permits these disparities to persist through time.

This paper contributes to the growing literature on the modeling of racialized perceptions by considering the controversy about racial disproportionality in child neglect.<sup>3</sup> Child neglect, unlike outcomes in traffic stops or rental markets or job interviews, comes within the framework of social workers. Historically, social workers have been white females whose work is driven by compassion, dedication to the disadvantaged, and commitment to equality. Yet, in child welfare we see wide racially disparate outcomes just as one sees in other spheres of society, such as the criminal justice system, labor markets, housing markets, or credit markets.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, one rarely sees the “smoking gun” of bigoted, racially offensive behavior on the part of child protective service (CPS) workers. Indeed, charges of racial discrimination or racial bias by such workers often produce great pain and anguish within the social work profession (Drake & Rank, 2009). Thus, the methodology we employ in this paper is designed to uncover unconscious and underlying perceptions that, through training or interventions, offer the potential to change behavior.

A further contribution of this paper is that it produces evidence that there is a relationship between indices of racialized perceptions and observed outcomes, such as racial disproportionality, in substantiated maltreatment across counties. Thus, although it is helpful to produce new ways of measuring racialized perceptions, what is more important is being able to empirically establish whether there is any relationship between these perceptions on one hand and actual outcomes on the other.

This paper models racialized perceptions of child protective service workers and tests the hypothesis that these perceptions contribute to the racial disproportionality in reported and/or substantiated child maltreatment. Three aspects of overrepresentation are of interest. They are the overrepresentation of African American children: a) who are reported to county child protective services for alleged abuse or neglect; b) whose maltreatment cases are investigated and substantiated by county child protective service workers; c) who are placed in foster care or out-of-home placement, in part as a result of county investigations and substantiations.

The data for our analysis come from Minnesota where African Americans are five to six times more likely to be found in child

protective services (CPS) than they are found in the child population, producing one of the highest disproportionality rates in the nation.<sup>5</sup> African Americans are more likely to be found in every stage of the process, from report to out-of-home and foster care placement, than they are to be found in the general child population. While this disproportionality exists elsewhere in the United States, it is particularly acute in Minnesota and has prompted legislation requiring documentation and research to reduce it (2001 Minnesota Session Laws, First Special Session, Chapter 9, Article 11, Section 15).

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we summarize the controversy about the racial disproportionality of African American children in child protective services. We provide some background on the possible causes for overrepresentation of African American children in the child welfare system. Second, we discuss methods and techniques suggested in the literature to model racialized perceptions or beliefs of caseworkers. We then detail the method adopted for this analysis, which captures the salient features of “stereotype” assessments (e.g., implicit association tests; Gawronski, 2002; Greenwald et al., 1998; Ottaway et al., 2001) and stereo-type threat models performance (Aronson et al., 1998; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995) while focusing on visual representations of state definitions of neglect and reportable offenses.

Our hypothesis is that black disproportionality in reported and substantiated child neglect hinges on how and whether case workers visualize black vs. white neglect situations. If things that “look black” are more likely to be perceived by caseworkers as reportable offenses or to meet state definitions of child maltreatment than things that “look white,” then this could be a pretext for locating larger fractions of black children among the reported and substantiated or out-of-home placements.

We were fortunate in constructing our test of racialized perceptions because our interviews with child welfare workers produced a consistent illustration of what constitutes a specific form of neglect. In the state of Minnesota it refers to a failure to provide adequate food, clothing, or shelter that endangers a child’s welfare constitutes neglect.<sup>6</sup> Our interviews with caseworkers unveiled a concept called “the messy room (or apartment)” phenomenon. Respondents in our interviews uniformly indicated that a filthy, messy, disorderly living environment is something they “know when they see it” and “it” usually signals a neglectful set of circumstances. Building on this illustration of what case workers visualize as neglect—whenever they visit a home after a report or during an investigation—we have constructed a test that is then used to produce an index of racialized perceptions on the part of case workers in a county. We then test the hypothesis that these racialized perceptions are statistically related to disproportionality rates.

## 2. The racial disproportionality controversy: reasons for overrepresentation of black children in the child welfare system

African American children are 1.6 times more likely to be found in child protective services<sup>7</sup> and two times more likely to be found in out-of-home placement than they are to be found in the overall population.<sup>8</sup> In some states like Wisconsin and Minnesota with relatively small black populations, the disproportionality rates are even higher.

<sup>3</sup> We focus in this paper on both a) racial disproportionality in child maltreatment and b) disparities by caseworkers in assessment of child neglect. For more on the confusion between disproportionality and disparities in child protective services see Myers, 2011 and Wulczyn, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> There are wide racial gaps in housing, credit, and labor markets (Darity & Myers, 1998; Ladd, 1998; Yinger, 1995). There are also wide racial disparities in the business outcomes (Bates, Lofstrom & Servon, 2010; Boston, 1999; Fairlie & Meyer, 1996, 2000; Fairlie & Robb, 2007). In public procurement and contracting, for example, African American business enterprises are far less likely than other firms to bid successfully on state and federally funded construction, professional services, and other contracts, and when they are successful they receive contracts of smaller size than other firms (GEOD vs NJT, 2010; Myers & Chan, 1996). Other widely cited racial disparities include those in the criminal justice system, school performance, traffic stops, and health care.

<sup>5</sup> Also in Minnesota, American Indians are four to five times more likely to be found in the CPS than they are to be found in the child population; Hispanics are 1.7 to 2.7 times more likely to be found in the CPS than they are to be found in the child population (Ards et al., 1998).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Minnesota’s child neglect definition, Minnesota Statutes Chapter 626, No. 556 Subdivision 2. Definition (Minnesota) (d) NEGLECT.

<sup>7</sup> Estimation based on U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. *Child Maltreatment 2006*. Table 3–11, Race and Ethnicity of Victims, 2006, p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> Estimation based on U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. *The AFCARS Report, Preliminary FY 2006 Estimates as of January 2008* and U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division.

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