Many African American adolescents who enter high school with low achievement are at-risk for being perceived as defiant and uncooperative by their classroom teachers. This generalized view of risk, however, offers little understanding of the differentiated behavior these students have with their teachers. The study followed 35 African American students, who have a history of low achievement, across multiple classrooms in their school day. Hierarchical linear modeling showed that there was greater variability in teacher-perceived defiance, cooperation, and office discipline referrals “within-student” compared with “between-students.” This shows that individual students tended to be perceived differently across their teachers. Similarly, the study found that students also tended to differentiate their teachers. Students who reported unfair treatment with a particular teacher were more likely to receive a discipline referral and be perceived as defiant and uncooperative by that teacher. Implications for a strengths-based approach to classroom behavior are discussed. © 2010 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

INTRODUCTION

A description of the risks faced by African American adolescents, with a history of low achievement and discipline referrals, may echo a familiar, despairing theme. These
students are placed at-risk for later low achievement and eventual drop out (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). They are likely to continue to receive discipline referrals (Atkins et al., 2002) and be perceived by their teachers as uncooperative and defiant (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). This all-encompassing view of risk obscures a more nuanced view of individuals within context (American Psychological Association [APA] Task Force, 2008). Most low-achieving, African American adolescents likely have a textured experience of their classroom teachers. Their perceptions of teachers and their behavior may, in fact, vary from classroom to classroom. Yet, little is known about what factors could help explain such variability.

Given the deleterious effects of perceived discrimination (Neblett, Philip, Cogburn, & Sellers, 2006), one promising explanatory factor is student perceptions of unfair treatment. The current study follows a cohort of African American high school students with a focus on variability in their cooperative and defiant behavior with multiple classroom teachers. The study also examines whether student perceptions of specific teachers as unfair are linked to increased risk for disciplinary referrals and being perceived as defiant and uncooperative in those classrooms.

**Student Differences in Discipline Referrals**

*Over-representation of African American students in discipline referrals.* Trends in student race and disciplinary sanctions have been documented for decades (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975). A consistent finding is that African American students are disproportionality overrepresented in school discipline compared with their enrollment rates and compared with other racial and ethnic groups (Gregory, 1997; Gregory, NyGreen, & Moran, 2006; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). For instance, drawing from a nationally representative sample, Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, and Bachman (2008) found that of 74,000 10th graders, between 2001 and 2005, about 50% of African American 10th-grade students reported that they had been suspended or expelled compared with about 20% of European American students. They also showed that suspensions and expulsions of African American students were on the rise from 1991 to 2005. Another national study showed that almost one in five African American students (19.5%) was suspended in 2003 (KewelRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007). The risk has been shown to be particularly high for African American males (Raffaele-Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002).

Recent research has highlighted the specific disciplinary problems arising from teacher perceptions of African American students (Townsend, 2000). Skiba and colleagues (2002) found that African American middle school students, as compared with European American middle school students, were more likely to be issued referrals for subjective reasons, such as defiance and disrespect. Also in a middle school sample, Wentzel (2002) found that teachers perceived African American students as more defiant, disrespectful, and rule-breaking than other groups. A similar trend has been documented in high school. Gregory and Weinstein (2008) found that when considering both African American and European American high school students with discipline referrals, African American students were more likely than European American students to be referred for reasons related to defiance. Together, these studies suggest that African American youth are at-risk of being perceived as defiant by their teachers and, consequently, issued discipline

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referrals and sent out of class, thereby missing important instructional time. These studies point to the need for a deeper understanding of teacher-perceived defiance and cooperation.

**Variability Across Classrooms Teachers**

*Teacher perceptions of behavior and discipline referrals.* Discipline referrals issued from the classroom reflect the culmination of complex social processes between teachers and students (Vavrus & Cole, 2002). Both parties interpret one another’s behavior and react accordingly. For students, such processes are not likely uniform across the whole school day. Students traverse multiple classrooms and encounter different adults. Aggregated measures of student behavior, or perceptions of that behavior, tell us little about the textured experience of students through their day (Talbert & McLaughlin, 1999). Assumptions about the continuity of adolescents’ behavior can be particularly pernicious when applied to African American youth. Negative stereotypes and media portrayals of African American youth as dangerous and aggressive have seeped into the culture (Devine & Elliot, 2000; Noguera & Akom, 2000).

The call for a more contextual examination of the dynamic interaction between the situation and individual behavior is not new (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). In the school setting, Achenbach and colleagues (1987) have found that inter-teacher agreement in their observations of students’ behavior shared only 40% common variance. They suggest that differences in informants’ reports may indicate situational or relational specificity of behavior. The high school setting is particularly well-suited to examine the specificity of adolescents’ defiant or cooperative behavior. Most adolescents move from classroom to classroom while interacting with different teachers.

Teachers may vary in the degree to which they perceive cooperative or defiant behavior with the same students. One study supports this assertion. Gregory and Weinstein (2008) showed that teachers experience the same students differently. In their study of African American students who received discipline referrals for defiance, they found that the discipline referring teacher perceived the student as more defiant than another teacher with whom the student reported getting along. This study offers an initial glimpse into the teacher-specific nature of defiance. However, the study’s conclusions were limited by the selection of teachers, which reflected two extreme groups: those positively nominated by the student and those who had referred the students for defiance. The current study, instead, examines student experience in multiple core-subject courses (e.g., English, science, math, and history).

In addition, the present study adds to an understanding of student variability across multiple classroom teachers with its examination of teacher-issued office discipline referrals (ODRs). Most discipline referrals originate in the classroom (Skiba et al., 2002). Reasons for ODRs range from tardiness to fighting to defiance (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). Given that teachers are the most frequent disciplinary referrers, it is important to identify ODR trends that originate in the classroom.

*Unfair treatment across classrooms.* Identifying variability in teacher-perceived behavior and teacher-issued ODRs across classrooms raises questions about whether students perceive their individual teachers differently. If so, then understanding the relation-
ship between student perceptions and teacher perceptions becomes imperative. It may be that negative perceptions in the teacher-student dyad are interrelated.

African American youth’s perceptions of unfair or fair treatment by their teachers may be an important component of their experience of teachers. Some studies have examined more general perceptions of fairness at the school level (e.g., Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005) and other studies have focused on differential treatment due to achievement standing (e.g., Marshall & Weinstein, 1986), gender (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999), and race (e.g., Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008). As a whole, the studies show that perceptions of unfair or discriminatory treatment have been linked to negative outcomes for youth. For instance, youth’s awareness of racial discrimination was associated with greater psychological distress (Gibbons, Gerrard, Cleveland, Wills, & Brody, 2004), more behavioral problems (Brody et al., 2006), and less academic engagement (Chavous et al., 2008). In fact at the classroom level, adolescents who perceived more discrimination, compared with those who perceived less discrimination or none at all, had lower grades (Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003), lower levels of academic engagement (Smalls, White, Chavous, & Sellers, 2007), and less academic curiosity and persistence (Neblett et al., 2006). In addition, several studies have found that African American adolescents report differential, negative treatment based on race (Ruck & Wortley, 2002), which they believed resulted in harsher punishments for engaging in the same behaviors as European American students (Marcus, Gross, & Seefeldt, 1991; Murray & Clark, 1990). Taken together, these studies suggest the need to better understand student-perceived unfairness in the classroom, particularly as it relates to teacher perceptions of cooperative and defiant behavior. Examining the dynamic relationship between student perceptions of their teachers and teacher perceptions of their students begins to highlight the relational nuances, which can promote or detract from student success.

Summary

Research has documented how behavioral trajectories are relatively stable (McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, & Cochrane, 2008). Students experienced as aggressive or oppositional in the early years are often experienced in similar ways in later years (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). This somewhat acontextual approach to studying behavior obscures the textured experience of adolescents and teachers across different course subjects in high school. As adolescents traverse classrooms in high schools, their behavior and teacher perceptions of that behavior may vary. Yet, little is known about variation in adolescent behavior with their teachers. With a sample of African American adolescents who shared a history of low achievement, the current study is the first to compare teacher perceptions of student behavior in core subject classrooms in high school. It was expected that students would have substantial variability across their classroom teachers in terms of the degree to which their teachers perceived defiance/cooperation and issued discipline referrals. Similarly, it was expected that students would differentiate between their teachers in terms of perceived unfair treatment. Given past research on unfair or discriminatory treatment (Wong et al., 2003), it was anticipated that student reports of unfair treatment would be related to teachers’ negative perceptions of student behavior.

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Given the strong link between achievement and behavior (Miles & Stipek, 2006), grade point average (GPA) needed to be taken into account in the analyses. It was anticipated that the findings would replicate the well-established link between achievement and behavior. Specifically, it was expected that students with low GPAs from their first year in high school would be perceived more negatively and receive more ODRS from their teachers in their second year of high school.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Adolescents in the present study were enrolled in a large public high school of approximately 1,200 students, which was located in a Southeastern city. All of the study’s participants attended the school’s ninth-grade transition program specifically designed for students identified as low achievers because of marked underperformance during their eighth-grade year. In eighth grade, almost every student in the program had received a D or F in at least two core academic courses. In eighth grade, they collectively had over 180 discipline referrals and, on average, they each individually received six discipline referrals. The program comprised a majority of African American and low-income students. Approximately, 80% of the students selected for the program received free/reduced priced lunch.

Seventy-five percent of the African American students in the 2006–2007 ninth-grade transition program agreed to participate in the study. By the following school year, five of the African American participants had transferred or been placed in a state run facility (e.g., Department of Juvenile Services). The 2007–2008 sample comprised 35 African American students. The sample was 49% female (n = 17) and 51% male (n = 18). Thirty of the students were in 10th grade and five of the students had been retained in ninth grade.

For the 2007–2008 school year, all core subject teachers (i.e., English, science, math, and history) were asked to participate in the study. All but two teachers agreed to participate (92% response rate). A majority of the students were rated by three teachers (n = 18). However, three students had two teacher raters and 14 students had four teacher raters. Overall, 23 teachers were included in the analyses of which eight were male and 14 were female. Almost all the teachers identified as European American, except for an African American and a Korean American teacher.

**Procedures**

Researchers presented the aims of the study to all students in the ninth-grade program. Then, interested students returned signed student assent and parental consent forms. Student survey and interview data were collected throughout the 2006–2007 and 2007–2008 school years. For this study, student survey data from January and February of the school year 2007–2008 were used. Upon completion of the surveys and interviews, students received a movie ticket.

In the 2007–2008 school year, researchers presented the study aims to those who taught core classes (i.e., English, science, math, and history) with at least one student participant. Consented teachers completed surveys on each student in the fall and in the spring. For this study, the teachers’ spring (April and May) survey data were used.
to reflect their perceptions of the students after having interacted with them for close to one school year. All of the teachers who completed surveys and a one hour interview received monetary compensation for their time.

**Measures**

*School records.* School administrators released participants’ end-of-year grades for 2006–2007 and ODRs for 2007–2008. End-of-year grades were assigned a numeric value (F = 0, D = 1, C = 2, B = 3, A = 4) and averaged to obtain a GPA. The school district also supplied student gender, which needed to be considered in analyses because African American males have been shown to receive more discipline sanctions than African American females (Raffaele-Mendez et al., 2002).

*Teacher perception of student behavior.* The 10th grade English, science, math, and history teachers completed two measures of each student’s behavior. Teachers completed a Defiance subscale of the SNAP-IV, which is based on eight diagnostic symptoms of oppositional defiant disorder (Swanson, 1992). From 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much), the teachers rated the frequency with which a student, for instance, “defies adult request” and “does things deliberately that annoy other people.” Cronbach alphas were computed on the 8-item scale and the internal consistency was high (alpha = 0.93). Teachers completed a 9-item survey of student cooperation on a 4-point scale (Wellborn, 1991). Teachers rated the degree to which they agreed to characterizations about the student, such as “This student works only as hard as necessary to get by” and “This student concentrates on doing his/her work in my class.” Cronbach’s alpha was high (alpha = 0.94).

*Student perceptions of teachers.* Students rated each of their teachers on an unfair treatment scale. Specifically, Roeser, Eccles, and Sameroff’s (1998) scales on adolescent perceptions of negative treatment because of race and gender were combined and expanded to include achievement standing. The six-item scale included: “This teacher disciplines you more harshly than other kids because of your race”; “This teacher treats you more harshly than other students who do better than you in class”; and “This teacher disciplines you more harshly than other kids of the opposite sex.” The ratings ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always) and the scale had a high Cronbach’s alpha (0.92). Higher scores indicated higher student-perceived unfair treatment.

*Data analytic plan.* Descriptive statistics were examined. For each student, averages were calculated across his or her teachers on ODRs, student-perceived unfair treatment, and teacher-perceived defiance, and cooperation. Then, Pearson’s correlations were run to identify associations among the school records, student reports, and teacher reports.

Variables were then examined with a focus on within-student differences that reflect the degree to which students differed across multiple classroom teachers. For each student, the degree of variability of teacher-perceived behavior and ODRs was examined by subtracting the students’ highest teacher rating (or number of ODRs) from their lowest teacher rating (or number of ODRs). The difference score was then compared with the standard deviation for the variable of interest. A similar descriptive analysis was conducted for each student’s reports of unfair treatment by his or her multiple teachers. A student case example was presented in Figure 1 to provide a
graphic depiction of within-student variability. Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) was then conducted to ascertain statistical differences in within-student and between-student variability in the dependent variables: ODRs, perceived defiance, and perceived cooperation. HLM 6.0 software was used for analyses. HLM was considered the appropriate data analytic approach given the nonindependence of the measures; each student had measures from multiple teachers, which means they were “nested” within each student (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002).

HLM models were examined for each of the three level-1 outcome variables: (1) teacher-reported defiance, (2) teacher-reported cooperation, and (3) teacher-issued office discipline referrals. Preliminary analyses showed that student gender was a nonsignificant predictor in all the statistical models. For the sake of parsimony, student gender was, thus, excluded from all models. Three models were examined for each outcome. The first model was the two-level HLM model with no predictors (unconditional model). Results from this model were used to calculate the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC), which is the proportion of between-student variance (i.e., $\sigma^2_u$) to the total variance (i.e., $\sigma^2_u + \sigma^2_e$). The second model included one level-2 control variable, GPA from their first year in high school (2006–2007). The third model for each outcome variable included GPA, plus a predictor at level 1: student-perceived unfair treatment by each of the student’s teachers in the study. Comparisons among the three models identified the proportion of variance (PV) explained in the outcome when GPA and unfair treatment were added to the model. Note that the PV for GPA is the proportion of between-student variance explained and the PV for unfair treatment is the proportion of within-student variance explained. The final models for each dependent variable were as follows

**Level 1 Model:**

\[ Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{ij} \text{ (Unfair treatment}_{ij}) + e_{ij} \]

**Level 2 Model:**

\[ \beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} \text{ (GPA)} + u_{0j} \]
\[ \beta_{ij} = \gamma_{10} + u_{1j} \]
RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Overall, teachers perceived the students to be “just a little defiant” on the defiance scale \((M = 1.84)\), yet the perceptions varied from 1 (not at all) to 3.29 (pretty much) (Table 1). Teacher-perceived student cooperation varied widely, and the overall mean \((M = 2.44)\) was at the midpoint of the scale between 2 (uncharacteristic) and 3 (somewhat characteristic). The range of referrals students received from each teacher was between zero and two discipline referrals. Overall, the students ranged in their reports of unfair treatment from never being unfairly treated \((Min = 1.00)\) to sometimes being unfairly treated \((Max = 3.21)\). At the end of their first year of high school, 43% of the sample had a GPA that was lower than 2.0 (ranging from F to D) and an additional 40% of the sample had a GPA that was between 2.0 and 3.0 (ranging from C to B).

Pearson’s correlations showed that the dependent variables were moderately correlated in the expected direction (Table 2). Students perceived as more defiant by their teachers were less likely to be seen as cooperative \((r = -.46, p < .01)\) and more likely to receive ODRs \((r = .60, p < .001)\), compared with the students perceived as less defiant. Students who reported more unfair treatment were more likely to be perceived by their teachers as defiant \((r = .38, p < .05)\). Students with higher grade point averages in their first year of high school, compared with those with lower grade point averages, were seen as more cooperative \((r = .57, p < .01)\) and less defiant \((r = -.40, p < .05)\) by their teachers in the next school year.

The variability of perceived behavior and ODRs for each student was examined. The students’ highest teacher rating (or number of ODRs) was subtracted from the lowest teacher rating (or number of ODRs). The difference in ratings was then compared with the standard deviation \((SD)\) of the variable of interest. For teacher reports of defiance,
60% of the sample ($n = 20$) had reports that differed greater than 1 SD on the defiance scale. Fifty-four percent of students ($n = 15$) had teachers who differed by more than 1 SD on the cooperation scale. In a similar manner, student perceptions of unfair treatment were examined. Thirty-three percent of the students ($n = 11$) perceived differences in unfair treatment among their teachers (at least one SD difference).

Figure 1 depicts the “within-student” behavioral variability for an African American female student across her English, history, and math teachers. With her English teacher, the student’s defiance rating was 1 SD higher than with her history and math teachers. Figure 1 also shows that the student’s English teacher perceived her more than one SD lower on cooperation compared with her history and math teachers. She received four ODRs in her English class and one in her history and math class. The student perceived more unfair treatment in English than in history and math classes.

Hierarchical linear modeling. The unconditional Model 1 showed that 21% of the variance in defiance was between students ($ICC = 0.12$; Table 3). A majority (79%) of the variance in defiance was within-student. In other words, an individual student tended to have greater variation in defiance across his or her multiple teachers as compared with variation compared with other students. Model 2 included GPA as a predictor of between-student differences in defiance. Students with a lower GPA in their first year in high school tended to be viewed as more defiant by their teachers in the next school year ($\gamma_{01} = -.26$, $p < .05$). Compared with the unconditional model, GPA accounted for 22% of the between-student variance. Model 3 included student-perceived unfair treatment at level 1. It showed that beyond GPA, the more unfairly a student felt treated, the more likely the student was perceived as defiant ($\beta_{1j} = .98$, $p < .01$). Model 3 also showed that the level 1 predictor, unfair treatment, accounted for 11% of the within-student variation.

The unconditional Model 4 showed that 29% of the variance in cooperation was between students ($ICC = 0.29$; Table 4). Thus, a majority (71%) of the variance in cooperation was within-student. Model 5 showed that students with a higher GPA in their first year in high school tended to be viewed as more cooperative by their teachers in the next school year ($\gamma_{01} = .39$, $p < .001$). Compared with the unconditional model, GPA accounted for 49% of the between-student variance. Model 6 included student-perceived unfair treatment at level 1. It showed that beyond GPA, the less unfairly a

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Note. HLM = hierarchical linear modeling; SE = standard error; GPA = grade point average.

*Proportion of unexplained variance reduced from Model 1 (unconditional model).

**$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$; ****$p < .001$. 

Table 3. HLM Analysis with Teacher-Reported Defiance as Level 1 Outcome

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student felt treated, the more likely the student was perceived as cooperative ($\beta_{1j} = -0.91$, $p < .01$). Unfair treatment accounted for 11% of the within-student variation.

The unconditional Model 7 showed that 20% of the variance in ODRs was between students ($ICC = 0.20$; Table 5). In Model 8, results showed that students with a lower GPA in their first year in high school tended to receive more ODRs in the next school year ($\gamma_{01} = -0.37$, $p < .01$). Compared with the unconditional model, GPA accounted for 39% of the between-student variance. A majority (80%) of the variance in ODRs was within-student. Model 9 included student-perceived unfair treatment at level 1. Notwithstanding a student’s GPA, the more unfairly a student felt treated, the more likely the student received an ODR ($\beta_{1j} = 0.98$, $p < .05$). Unfair treatment accounted for 13% of the within-student variation.

**DISCUSSION**

The study offers a new understanding of teacher perceptions of African American high school students who had a history of low achievement in middle school. In their second year of high school, the students were perceived differently by their teachers across...
classrooms. Specifically, reports of a student’s cooperation and defiance depended on the teacher. In addition, the number of office discipline referrals the student received varied across classroom teachers. This variability in behavioral outcomes, or within-student variability, differed greatly from the between-student variability. The study was the first to identify predictors of both the within and the between variation. Student differences from one another (between-student differences) were partially explained by GPA from the previous school year. Students with higher grades their first year in high school were more likely to be seen as cooperative and less likely to be perceived as defiant and receive an office discipline referral from their teachers in the next school year. Within-student variability, or differences across classroom teachers for a given individual student, was partially explained by student-perceived unfair treatment. A student who felt more unfairly treated by one of his or her teachers was more likely to be perceived as defiant, more likely to receive a referral, and less likely to be perceived as cooperative by that teacher. The findings were striking for their convergence across measures of student behavior (e.g., defiance, cooperation, and office discipline referrals).

**Differences between students.** The results showed that 20%–30% of the variation in defiance, cooperation, and office discipline referrals was between-students. This indicates that there was some consistency in how students were experienced across multiple teachers. Of the 20%–30% of between-student variance, a substantial portion (22% to 49%) was explained by GPAs from the year before. Compared with students with higher grade point averages, students with lower grade point averages at the end of their first year of high school tended to be viewed as more defiant and less cooperative by their teachers at the end of the next year of high school. They also tended to receive more ODRs from their teachers. This finding corroborates decades of research on the link between achievement and behavior (e.g., Miles & Stipek, 2006). Importantly, of the three dependent variables, cooperative behavior had the largest amount of variance explained by GPA (49%). This may not be surprising given how grades are largely based on students’ engagement with classroom tasks. Overall, these findings confirm that African American youth who end their first year in high school with lower GPAs are at-risk for negative behavioral outcomes in the next school year.

Unexpectedly, student gender did not explain between-student differences in the behavioral outcomes. The lack of gender findings related to the ODRs is especially surprising given patterns in school suspension and expulsion. For instance, a nationally representative study showed that African American males were twice as likely to be expelled as African American females (KwelRamani et al., 2007). One explanation for the incongruent findings may relate to the nature of the behavioral outcomes in the current study. Teacher perceptions of uncooperative behavior/defiant behavior and teacher-issued office referrals for varying rule infractions (e.g., tardiness, disruption) may reflect a wider range of negative interpersonal interactions than the more typical reasons for expulsion (e.g., assault, carrying a weapon). Negative teacher-student interactions may include less overt and more subtle forms of aggression, such as relational aggression. Numerous studies have found that females are more likely to engage in relational aggression (e.g., Cappella & Weinstein, 2006). That said, additional research is needed to understand if there is a new trend whereby African American females have increasingly negative interactions with their teachers.

**Differences within students.** Based on student reports and school records (ODRs), 70%–80% of the variation was within-student compared with between-students. This
means that a vast majority of differences of teacher-reported behavior and ODRs was across classroom settings for individual students. The study’s findings emphasize the need to move away from a generalized perspective of low achieving African American students as at-risk for being perceived as oppositional by their teachers. A generalized perspective about negative student behavior, or teacher perceptions of that behavior, obscures the differentiated experiences of African American adolescents. Findings showed variability in teacher-perceived behavior. Two perspectives on this issue are possible. One perspective is that teachers’ understanding of what constitutes defiant or cooperative behavior differs. Some teachers may feel their authority is being challenged by a student’s gesture or verbalization, whereas other teachers may perceive the same act as benign or unchallenging. In fact, past research shows that teachers differ in how many defiance referrals they issue and the degree to which they interpret behavior as uncooperative (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Gregory, NyGreen, & Moran, 2006). Another perspective on the variation in teacher-reported behavior is that students alter their classroom behavior and respond differently to teacher authority across the school day (Gregory & Ripski, 2008). Likely, both perspectives are true: teachers differ from one another in their “read” of behavior and students calibrate their behavior across classroom settings. This finding challenges assumptions about consistency in the quality of teacher-student relationships across the school day. With a closer examination of teacher-student dyads, a new understanding of the classroom-specific nature of defiance and cooperation is made possible.

Given the lack of racial comparison groups in the current study, we can only speculate why some African American student-teacher dyads in some classrooms (but not in other classrooms) were characterized by mutually negative perceptions. Stevenson (2008) speculates that authority conflicts between teachers and African American students are fueled by racial tension. He contends that such tension and stress are related to teacher and student fears of being perceived as incompetent. Some teachers fear that they will be seen as racist or uneducated about African American student behavior. African American students fear being underestimated in their abilities or being treated unfairly. Stevenson argues this may be an unconscious process, which affects individuals’ reactivity to one another. Other scholars have offered a range of hypothesized reasons for racially related authority conflicts. Ferguson (2000) emphasizes the contribution of European American teachers’ cultural misreading and negative stereotyping of African American students’ language and physical expression. Teachers’ interpretation of behavior may be affected by implicit racial bias, which operates out of conscious awareness (e.g., Kawakami & Dovidio, 2001).

Other contributors to authority conflicts include African American students’ resistance to injustice or teacher unfairness (e.g., Sheets, 1996). The present study found some support for the interrelationship between student-perceived unfair treatment and teacher-perceived defiant/uncooperative behavior. Given the correlational nature of the data, it is impossible to claim directionality of effect. In other words, unknown is whether students develop perceptions of teachers as unfair after they have been sent to the office, clash with the teacher’s authority, or receive a reprimand for a rule infraction. Similarly unknown is whether a different temporal chain of cause and effect occurs. Some students may react against unfair treatment, which results in sanctions from adult authority, which then reinforces the students’ perceptions of unfair treatment. Despite these unknowns, the interrelationship between teachers and students’ shared perceptions, found in this study, suggest that both sides of the dyad can detect negative interactions. This shared acknowledgement...
holds promise that both teacher and student disputants might understand the need for targeted teacher-student interventions such as conflict mediation.

**Implications for Practice**

Variability of student behavior across classroom context offers important implications for shifting toward a strengths approach and away from a deficit perspective of African American youth (APA, 2008). The study found that students, even those perceived as defiant and uncooperative from some of their teachers, had other teachers who perceived them in a more positive light. Students who received ODRs in some classrooms did not receive them in other classrooms. In addition, students reported that they received fair treatment from many of their classroom teachers. Taken together, these findings suggest that positive teacher-student relationships may facilitate “pockets of protection” for students. School administrators might consider systematic ways to identify these areas of protection for individual African American students who are receiving disciplinary referrals from some teachers but not others. Using a mentorship model (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004) or a professional learning communities model (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008) teachers with positive relationships with the student could help intervene with the problematic teacher-student dyad and instruct their colleagues on strategies for eliciting cooperation with that student.

The study’s findings should be contextualized within the current debates concerning “value added” assessments of teacher effects. In terms of achievement, value-added is a teacher’s unique contribution to students’ academic growth (McCaffrey, Lockwood, Koretz, & Hamilton, 2003). Whether a teacher contributes to growth may be tied to financial rewards or job evaluations (Amrein-Beardsley, 2008). Given the high stakes involved, value-added assessments have been critiqued for focusing on a single narrow measure of student growth (Amrein-Beardsley, 2008). Teacher effects are much broader. The present study’s findings suggest that a wider range of value added outcomes might be considered. Some teachers may be more effective in eliciting cooperation from their students than other teachers. A careful examination of student data across the school day may help identify which teachers are fostering positive behaviors in the very same students who are perceived as defiant in other classrooms.

**Limitations**

Several limitations of the study need to be considered. The study focused on the experiences of 35 African American youth who shared similar histories of low achievement and high discipline referrals. Given the small sample size, findings must be interpreted with caution. Replicating the results with a larger sample using similar data analytic techniques (i.e., HLM) would strengthen confidence in the findings. In addition, the size and homogeneity of the sample made comparisons across different groups of adolescents impossible (e.g., high achieving, Latino, European American).

Future research would need to tease out possible teacher rater bias. Some of the teachers in the current study rated multiple students. As a result, there was unaccounted nesting of teacher ratings, meaning teacher ratings were not independent from one student to another student. To identify the degree to which this affected the results, we re-ran HLM models with teachers at level 2 and found that there was more within-teacher variance than between-teacher variance in ratings of behavior.
and ODRs. Only 1.5% of the variance in cooperation was between teachers and 16%–18% of the variance in perceived defiance and ODRs was between teachers. In addition, when accounting for the teacher rating bias (teacher at level 2), student perceptions of unfair treatment remained a significant predictor of defiance, cooperation, and ODRs. In sum, models that took into account the multiple ratings by teachers showed similar results to the student-focused models presented in the study. This increases confidence in the validity of the findings. Moreover, the convergence of findings from the three distinct dependent variables—ODRs, perceived defiance, and perceived cooperation—adds additional credibility to the appropriateness of the data analytic strategy. That said, video-recorded observations of negative teacher-student and positive teacher-student interactions would help identify the degree to which students alter their behavior across classrooms or teachers differ in their interpretations of similar student behavior (Vavrus & Cole, 2002).

Summary

The study showed that African American adolescent behavior, as perceived by teachers, varied across classrooms. This implies that adolescent defiance to teacher authority and cooperation with academic tasks were not stable behavioral orientations in school. Instead, findings showed that teachers perceived adolescent behavior differently and adolescents perceived their teachers differently. Moreover, adolescents reported unfair treatment by some of their classroom teachers. Overall, these results show the importance of identifying variability in behavior for a sample of African American youth at-risk for discipline referrals. Looking closely at their experiences across classrooms, the findings suggest that the quality of teacher-student interactions may shift throughout the school day. This offers promise that positive African American student-teacher dyads could be drawn upon to help shift negative trends in discipline referrals in other classrooms and help launch African American youth on positive pathways.

REFERENCES


