

Fish, Rachel (2015). **The Intersection of Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Exceptionality: The Racialized Construction of Educational Disabilities and Giftedness**

**Abstract**

Researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners have recognized racial/ethnic disparities in special education services for decades, generally presuming that the “disproportionality” stems from inappropriate identification and racial/ethnic bias. Recent research contends that confounders, such as poverty and other disadvantages that are associated with race/ethnicity, explain racial/ethnic differences, while a paucity of research identifies any race/ethnicity effects. This body of research, along with the relevant policy, has paid far less attention to disparities in gifted education and to gender disparities in special and gifted education, and it tends to treat exceptionalities as essential categories indicating neurophysiological differences. In this dissertation, I argue that exceptionalities are socially constructed and varying in status, and I contribute to understanding of the social context in which they arise.

In the first empirical chapter, I address the polarization of the literature between confounders and racial/ethnic bias as explanations for disproportionality in special education. I use a factorial vignette survey, an experimental design, to test for race/ethnicity, nativity, and gender effects in how teachers respond to children indicating academic and behavioral differences in the classroom. I find that boys of color were more likely to be suspected of exceptionality when they exhibit behavioral challenges. I argue that the category of emotional disorder, which corresponds to such behavioral challenges and is relatively less advantaged among disabilities, may maintain or exacerbate racial/ethnic inequalities in education, especially for boys of color.

In the second empirical chapter, I use a dataset of Wisconsin public school students to test whether and how school racial/ethnic composition moderates the relationship between individual-race/ethnicity and placement in special education across the more subjective categories of disability. I find that white students who attend schools with more peers of color have increased risk of identification with more-advantaged disabilities, while students of color who attend schools with more same-race peers have decreased risk of placement in special education. These findings support explanations of frog-pond effects driven by racial/ethnic bias and also the mechanism of racial/ethnic competition.

In the final empirical chapter, I use the school-level racial composition data and the experimental survey design to examine whether a student’s race/ethnicity, nativity, and gender affect teacher decisions to refer for exceptionality testing differently in schools with different racial/ethnic compositions. I find that in schools with more white students, teachers are less likely to perceive academic challenges as disability when evaluating a boy of color. While white boys experience decreased likelihood of referral for behavior problems in schools with more white students, boys of color experience no such decrease. Conversely, when they work in schools with more white students, teachers are more likely to refer girls of color when they have academic challenges, and less likely to refer when they have behavioral challenges. I argue that these findings suggest some support for contextual effects explained by racial-bias-driven frog-pond effects.