



Transcript for “Does discrimination lead to differences in parenting practices?”

Featuring Owen Thompson

Hosted by David Chancellor

In this podcast, UW–Milwaukee economist Owen Thompson talks about his paper, “The Determinants of Racial Differences in Parenting Practices: Evidence from the Civil Rights Era” that examines how parenting practices changed among southern African Americans relative to their experiences during the civil rights era.

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[Chancellor] Hello, you’re listening to a November 2014 podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I’m Dave Chancellor.

For this podcast, I talked with UW Milwaukee Economics professor Owen Thompson about a paper he wrote that looks at how discrimination may affect the home environments in which children live. Researchers regularly find that African Americans have lower wages, higher unemployment rates, and do worse on a lot of other measures, compared to whites but disentangling the causes of these things gets tricky. One contributing factor is experience in early childhood, which can differ substantially by race. Given this, Professor Thompson is interested in why such differences in early childhood experiences exist.

[Thompson] When you walk into the homes of young African American children and compare the basic features of those homes to white children, you get really large striking differences. So, just things like if you ask, ‘hey, do you have ten children’s books here in the house?’ this is near universal among white parents, perhaps 95% say yes, and amongst African Americans it’s closer to 60 or 70 percent. So, very fundamental basic differences in the types of parenting behaviors that people are adopting and the type of cognitive stimulation that young children are experiencing at home.

So the question really of arises, you kick it up another notch and say where do differences in test scores coming from, why are the experiences so fundamentally different and try understand the determinants of things happening early in life as opposed to just taking those early life experiences as a given and say “oh, they have lots of implications and you can find their effects

many years later.” So we’re saying, ok, why do the day-to-day experiences of young African American children really look substantively different than lots of white children?

[Chancellor] One factor that Professor Thompson hypothesized contributes to these differences is discrimination. In order to test this theory, he focused on whether and how parenting practices changed around the time of the civil rights movement.

[Thompson] So the premise of this paper is that discrimination is hard to define and it’s hard to measure, but we can all agree that discrimination by any definition and by any measure fell in a pretty dramatic way in the United States South following the civil rights movement of the late 50s and early 60s and the resultant federal legislation which was really capped off with the 1964 Civil Rights Act. So in the period kind of after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act the discrimination faced by blacks in the U.S. South declined in a meaningful way. There’s still perhaps a long ways to go in certain ways, but certainly something big happened there. So the question of this paper is ‘can we trace out those changes and find detectable differences in the parenting behaviors adopted by southern blacks who were experiencing these rapid decreases in the degree of discrimination they face relative to, say, blacks outside of the south or whites inside the South. So, can we take out a race effect and take out a region effect and really concentrate on what happened to those cohorts that were specifically affected by the changes associated with the civil rights movement.

[Chancellor] To get at this question, Thompson studied individuals who were included in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth -- or the NLSY. The NLSY began in 1979 and has been following cohorts of people born between 1957 and 1964. The differing cohorts allowed him to follow individuals who had different experiences relative to the civil rights movement.

[Thompson] If you were an African American and you were born in the south in 1957, school desegregation in the south didn’t really begin in earnest until 1964 or 1965 and wasn’t really complete until 1970 so you were perhaps in sixth or seventh or eighth grade when desegregation happened so you had a lot of experience in fully segregated, fully unequal schools so whereas if you were born in 1964, you entered school in 1969 or 1970, you may have literally never observed a segregated school, you may have attended desegregated schools your entire educational career and there were similar differences that later born cohorts -- someone born in 1957 would have spent a much larger chunk of their childhood in an environment where black wages were much, much lower than white wages in the U.S. South. Whereas by 1964, while there were still big gaps, those gaps were considerably smaller.

[Chancellor] These social changes in the U.S. South happened very quickly and had a pretty dramatic effect on these cohorts. And, so, Thompson’s paper asks, if you follow these people as they go on and become parents, will their parenting behaviors look a lot different depending on

when they were born relative to school desegregation and the passage of other civil rights reforms? To measure parenting, Thompson used what is called the HOME score. HOME is an acronym for Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment. The HOME score is widely used by researchers to measure the level of cognitive stimulation occurring in the home.

[Thompson] The basic finding of the paper is that, yes, they were quite a bit different. So if you're from the South and you're an African American and you were born in 1964, the parenting behaviors you adopt with regard to your own children when you grow up are something like half a standard deviation more cognitively stimulating than someone born just eight years earlier in 1957. And you don't observe any effects of this nature say for African Americans outside of the South or for whites within the South. It really seems to be the effect of these experiences with reductions in discrimination that were associated with being born and growing up in the immediate post-civil rights era.

[Chancellor] This finding represents a really big change in parenting practices. And Thompson says that even though the civil rights era brought significant improvements in the material living conditions of African Americans in the South, economic and educational improvements only tell part of the story as to why parenting practices changed so substantially.

[Thompson] So certainly, southern blacks that were born in later cohorts in this period experienced substantively better circumstances and that's reflected in their human capital. People with higher levels of human capital typically engage in more cognitively stimulating parenting, and that's sort of the underlying mechanism, the basic socioeconomic characteristics of these parents are better if they were born later for that particular race and regional combination. Of course that explains 30 or 40 percent, or maybe a little bit more, but it doesn't explain all of it.

[Chancellor] So, there are other factors than just more education and higher wages driving this positive change in parenting behaviors. Thompson says he doesn't have a particularly clear story on this, but it seems probable that some of these changes came about because of a change in the level of discrimination felt by members of the later birth cohort in this study.

[Thompson] My personal kind of thinking -- this is somewhat more editorial and less analytical -- is that these changes that occurred, the kind of aggressive federal dismantling of an extraordinarily discriminatory set of institutions that occurred in this short period in the United States South represented a fundamental shift in the basic economic and social circumstances that southern African Americans were facing. There's lots of evidence from other disciplines, from economics, but also from anthropology and sociology and other researchers in various areas--that parenting adapts in order to instill in children the types of skills that are valued in the world they're living in.

[Chancellor] And Thompson says that if you look at changes in the parenting behaviors of southern African Americans in the post-civil rights era, it makes sense that there might be a real perception among parents that investments in their kids would pay off.

[Thompson] If I invest heavily in my child, those investments will reap rewards in a way that they might not have even ten years before. So if they're able to get through school and achieve highly, when they go out onto the labor market or go out into the world, they'll be able to translate that into meaningful improvements in their economic or social wellbeing, in a way that perhaps they weren't ten years ago. I think that part of this story is about the characteristics of the mothers, they have higher education, they have higher levels of income, you see this show up in their parenting. But I think part of it is also just about a more general set of perceptions and beliefs that things were going to get better and that their children's well-being would be well served by these types of behaviors.

[Chancellor] The achievement gap between African-American and white children is still significant today. And, while home environments almost certainly play into this gap, research like this reminds us that policy solutions need to take into account the larger social and institutional contexts in which these gaps exist.

Thanks to Owen Thompson for talking about this work with us. If you want to learn more about this paper, it, along with his data and code, are available on Thompson's UW-Milwaukee website.

Thanks for listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty.