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# **Perceived Ethnic Stigma Across the Transition to Adulthood**

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### Abstract

Despite the belief that stigma shapes the developmental trajectories of ethnic minorities, research has rarely examined changes in perceived stigma across the transition to adulthood. In this study, we examined changes in discrimination and public regard among 514 Latino, European, and Asian American emerging adults from 12<sup>th</sup> grade to two years post high school. We also examined whether these changes depended on school or work context, gender, and ethnicity. Results suggest that although ethnic minority emerging adults' reports of personal discrimination decrease across the transition to adulthood, their perceptions of society's negative opinion of their ethnic group increase. Ethnic stigma appears to be a unique challenge facing Latino youth, particularly those who attend four year colleges.

Key Words: discrimination, public regard, stigma, context, Latino, Asian

### **Perceived Ethnic Stigma Across the Transition to Adulthood**

The transition to adulthood is a critical period when adolescents begin to leave the familiar contexts of high school and home and enter postsecondary education or work. This can be a difficult transition because as youths establish their independence and autonomy, they also face instability in terms of their social identities and roles in society (Arnett, 2000). Negative treatment during a time when individuals pursue their educational and occupational goals may affect their long-term adjustment and attainment (Blank, Dabady, & Citro, 2004). This may be especially true for ethnic minority emerging adults who, although facing similar tasks as their majority peers, often encounter the additional challenge of coping with stigma associated with their ethnic background (Blank et al.).

Stigma can be experienced directly through overt discrimination or indirectly as part of a general awareness of the lower social valuation of one's ethnic group. Considering both types of stigma gives a more comprehensive understanding of the multiple ways in which ethnic minorities receive negative messages about their group. Stigma may place individuals at risk for worse outcomes in life, including lower earnings, poor health, and involvement in criminal activities (Link & Phelan, 2001; Major & O'Brien, 2005; Gillen-O'Neel, Ruble, & Fuligni, in press). Yet despite the belief that stigma shapes the developmental trajectories of ethnic minorities (Garcia-Coll et al., 1996), there has been little research that has examined changes in perceived stigma across the transition to adulthood. This is especially true for Latino and Asian Americans, the two fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States (US Census Bureau, 2005).

Latino and Asian American emerging adults may have different experiences with stigma. In contrast to the negative stereotypes of Latinos regarding criminality, academic ability, and social

status (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004), Asian Americans are often viewed as the “model minority” that are “somehow immune from cultural conflicts and discrimination” (p. 292; Sue, 1994). Yet Asian Americans still experience greater stigma than their European American peers. Two previous studies reported that Chinese American children perceived more negative public regard than their ethnic majority peers, and sometimes more negative public regard than other ethnic minority peers (Rivas-Drake, Hughes, & Way, 2009; Gillen-O’Neel et al., in press). These results suggest that despite the model minority stereotype, Asian Americans still experience stigma in American society.

Research with adolescents indicate that peer discrimination remains stable and adult discrimination increases across high school (Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006). The transition out of high school, however, increases the likelihood of exposure to negative treatment and stereotypes in other domains, particularly if moving to new and unfamiliar locations. Specifically, emerging adults who enter the workforce may face increased discrimination from employers, ultimately affecting their subsequent career decisions and pathways (Blank et al., 2004; Mays, Coleman, & Jackson, 1996). Similarly, students who attend college may become more aware of how society views their ethnic group and become exposed to discrimination in various academic and social contexts as they attempt to move through the academic pipeline (Borrell, Kiefe, Williams, Diez-Roux, & Gordon-Larsen, 2006; Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009). On the other hand, discrimination may decrease among college-going youth as students may be more open to new people and ideas during this time because contemporary American colleges often emphasize the importance of ethnic diversity (AAUC, 2010).

Increases in negative public regard has been found across other transitions, such as the one from middle school to high school (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2006; Seaton, Yip, & Sellers,

2009). Regardless of how personal experiences of discrimination change, we expect perceptions of negative public regard to increase across the transition to adulthood because emerging adults may recognize that some members of their ethnic group experiences discrimination and that their ethnic group continues to be negatively stereotyped and treated by society—independent of their personal experiences. However, we expect these changes to be attenuated by contextual factors such as whether emerging adults are enrolled in college and the characteristics of those schools.

Specifically, college-going Latino emerging adults who are subject to negative academic stereotypes may perceive more ethnic stigma as they move up the academic pipeline. Latino students may face more discrimination in four-year colleges than two-year colleges because they may be constantly defending to others that they earned their way to college and deserve to be there (Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993). In contrast, Asian American students are unlikely to be questioned about their enrollment in college because they are stereotyped as good students (Sue, 1994). Lastly, perceptions of stigma may depend on the ethnic composition of the colleges, but the direction of the association is unclear because ethnic diversity increases opportunities for both positive and negative intergroup contact. Recent research suggests that perceptions of discrimination among African Americans increases as the ethnic diversity of schools and neighborhoods rise (Seaton & Yip, 2009). It remains to be seen if the same is true for Latino and Asian American emerging adults.

In this brief report, we focused on three key questions. First, we examined changes in perceptions of both discrimination and the social valuation of one's ethnic group from the 12<sup>th</sup> grade to two years afterwards. Second, we examined whether these changes in perception varied according to whether individuals attended college or worked, and whether the changes varied among college students according to the type (two- vs. four-year) and ethnic composition of their

schools. Finally, we examine whether the answers to the first two questions depended upon adolescents' specific ethnic background and gender.

## Method

### Procedure

Participants were recruited in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade from three high schools in the Los Angeles area and followed two years later. All students in the target schools were eligible and approximately 63% of the enrolled students participated. Adolescents who completed the questionnaire in 12<sup>th</sup> grade were invited to complete an online survey two years later; a paper copy was mailed if requested by a participant. There was a 70.6% retention from 12<sup>th</sup> grade ( $N = 744$ ) to post high school ( $N = 525$ ) for the whole sample (Latino = 58.6%, Asian = 80.7%, European = 69.2%, and other ethnic minority = 69.9%).

This current study included 514 Asian American, Latino, European American, and other ethnic minority emerging adults ( $M_{age} = 20.17$ ,  $SD = .36$ ) who had complete reports of discrimination at both time points. The Asian American (70% Chinese) and Latino (85% Mexican) sample consisted primarily of first- and second- generation youths. European adolescents were primarily third generation or more. The other ethnic minority group included 28 African American, 13 Middle Eastern, and 76 participants who defined themselves as multiethnic. Gender (51.2% female) was equally represented.

Parents of European adolescents were more likely to have attended some college than parents of Asian and other ethnic minority adolescents, who were more likely to have completed high school than parents of Latino adolescents,  $F(3, 473) = 44.48$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .22$ . Parents of European and other ethnic minority adolescents were employed in higher level occupations than Asian parents, who worked in higher status occupations than Latino parents,  $F(3, 432) = 33.86$ ,  $p$

$< .01, \eta^2 = .19$ .

### Measures

**Peer and adult discrimination.** The frequency of peer discrimination was assessed at both time points using Greene et al.'s (2006) seven item scale. Adolescents were asked how often (1 = *never*, 5 = *all the time*) they perceived discrimination experiences from peers (e.g., “Feel that other kids treat you with less respect because of your race or ethnicity,” and “Feel that other kids threaten or harass you because of your race or ethnicity?”). For the items administered post high school, “other kids” were replaced with “other people your age”. This measure had good reliability ( $\alpha_{12\text{th}} = .93, \alpha_{\text{post high school}} = .94$ ), and was consistent among ethnic groups for both time points (Latino: .92, .95; Asian: .94, .95; European: .87, .89; other ethnic minority: .93, .94).

The frequencies of adult discrimination were assessed with the same items used above, but asked about “adults” in 12<sup>th</sup> grade and “other adults” post high school. This measure had good reliability ( $\alpha_{12\text{th}} = .94, \alpha_{\text{post high school}} = .95$ ), and was consistent among ethnic groups for both time points (Latino: .93, .95; Asian: .94, .95; European: .87, .93; other ethnic minority: .94, .95).

**Negative Public Regard.** To assess the extent to which emerging adults thought societal evaluations of their ethnic group were negative, emerging adults responded to five items from the Sellers Public Regard scale that were averaged such that higher means indicate more perceptions of negative societal evaluations (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). Example questions were “My ethnic group is considered good by others” (reverse coded) and “My ethnic group is not respected by society” on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) scale. This measure had good reliability ( $\alpha_{12\text{th}} = .81, \alpha_{\text{post high school}} = .86$ ), and was consistent among ethnic groups for both time points (Latino: .76, .85; Asian: .77, .84; European: .80, .80; other ethnic minority: .86, .88).

**Type of College Enrollment.** Participants indicated whether they were currently taking academic courses at a two- or four-year college, and if so, what kind of school it was (1 = 2-year community college, 2 = 4-year university, 3 = vocational, 4 = technical, 5 = trade, 6 = don't know). The majority of participants (87.5%) were currently attending some sort of college. Of those currently attending college, 66.2% attended a four-year college. One half of Latino (49.5%) and other ethnic minority students (52.1%) attended two-year colleges, whereas most Asian (71.2%) and European American (75.0%) students attended four-year universities. Additionally, 78% of those not currently attending some sort of college were currently working a part-time or full-time job.

**Residence.** Most students (90.8%) attending a two-year college lived at home whereas most students attending a four-year university (76.5%) lived away from home. Those not currently attending college lived primarily at home (68.4%).

**Ethnic composition of student body.** An index of ethnic diversity for each college ( $N = 106$ ) was computed by entering publicly available enrollment data into a formula that takes into account both the number of different groups in the school and the relative representation of each group (Simpson, 1949). The index represents the ethnic diversity of a given school and was based on six different groups: European American, Asian, Latino, African-American, American-Indian, and international students. Higher diversity scores indicate a more diverse school ( $M_{diversity\ score} = .71, SD = .09, \text{range } .19-.88$ ). Two-year colleges ( $M = .75, SD = .01$ ) were more diverse than four-year colleges ( $M = .70, SD = .01$ ),  $t(442) = 6.19, p < .05$ .

We also computed the percent of same-ethnic peers in college for each participant ( $M = 35.28\%, SD = 14.40\%, \text{range } 1\%-84\%$ ). Two-year colleges ( $M = 31.88\%, SD = 11.86\%$ ) had less same-ethnic peers than four-year colleges ( $M = 36.84\%, SD = 15.19\%$ ),  $t(367) = -3.11, p < .05$ .

## Results

We first conducted a series of time (high school, post high school) x ethnicity (Latino, Asian, other ethnic minority, and European background) x gender (male, female) analyses of variance (ANOVA) with each of the three measures of ethnic stigma as dependent variables. Parental socioeconomic status (SES; a standardized composite of parental education and occupation) was entered as a covariate. Additional models in which college enrollment (two-year, four-year, no college) and residence (living with or without parents) were entered as independent variables to test for differences in discrimination by college enrollment and whether college enrollment interacted with ethnicity. Finally, additional models examined the role of ethnic composition (overall diversity, percent same-ethnic peers) in reports of ethnic stigma among those who attended college. Generational status differences (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>) were also tested, but generation was never significant in the models and the results presented here are those from the analyses without generational status. Unless otherwise noted, all results reported were significant at  $p < .05$  and post hoc analyses used a Bonferonni correction.

### Ethnicity and Gender

Overall, participants reported less peer discrimination and marginally less adult discrimination after high school,  $F_s(1, 504-505) = 3.50-22.41, p_s < .001-.06, \eta^2_s = .01-.04$  (see Figure 1). In contrast, perceptions of negative public regard generally increased over time,  $F(1, 505) = 5.57, \eta^2 = .01$  (Figure 2). There was a marginal ethnic difference in changes in public regard such that negative public regard increased slightly over time for all groups except those Asian Americans,  $F(3, 504) = 2.37, p = .07, \eta^2 = .01$ . There were no gender differences in changes in stigma over time. Participants from lower SES backgrounds had a steeper decrease in peer discrimination over time than individuals from higher SES,  $F(1, 505) = 8.12$ .

Although changes in perceptions of stigma generally did not differ by ethnicity, there were significant ethnic differences in overall levels of reported stigma across both time points,  $F_s(3, 504-505) = 5.46-19.63$ ,  $\eta^2_s = .03-.11$ . All ethnic minority participants reported more peer and adult discrimination than their European peers. Additionally, Latino participants reported more peer and adult discrimination than their Asian American peers. Latino participants also reported higher levels of negative public regard than their other ethnic minority peers, who reported significantly higher levels than their European and Asian American peers.

Across both time points, males reported greater peer and adult discrimination than females,  $F_s(1, 504-505) = 5.18-6.92$ ,  $\eta^2_s = .01$ . However, there were no gender differences in reports of public regard,  $F(1, 504) = .17$ , *ns*.

### **College Enrollment**

Ethnic differences in changes in peer discrimination depended on postsecondary contexts,  $F(6, 492) = 2.12$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ . Follow-up ANOVAs conducted separately by ethnicity indicated that changes in peer discrimination depended on college enrollment only for Latino participants  $F(2, 108) = 4.04$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ . Specifically, peer discrimination increased over time for Latino participants who attended a four-year college but decreased over time for Latino participants who did not attend college or attended a two-year college (Figure 3). College enrollment was not related to changes in adult discrimination or public regard, either as a main or interactive effect.

Across both time points, college enrollment interacted with ethnicity in predicting overall reports of public regard,  $F(6, 491) = 2.70$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ . ANOVAs conducted separately by ethnicity indicated that Latinos who attended four-year colleges reported more negative public regard than those who attended two-year colleges,  $F(2, 108) = 3.96$ . College enrollment was not related to overall reports of public regard differences for any other ethnic groups. Location of residence

never predicted of either changes in or overall levels of stigma.

### **Ethnic Composition of College**

Ethnic diversity and the percent of same ethnic peers in college were entered as covariates into the previous ANOVAs of college enrollment in order to determine whether they were related to changes and overall levels of ethnic stigma. Neither aspect of ethnic composition was related to changes or overall levels of stigma and the effects of college enrollment reported above remained significant.

### **Discussion**

Perceptions of ethnic stigma showed a complex pattern of change over time, with some aspects declining and others showing significant increases. Surprisingly, there appears to be a normative decrease in discrimination across the transition to adulthood. Perhaps emerging adults believe that the people they interact with in college are less biased than those in high school and subsequently report less discrimination. Alternatively, the college peers our participants interact with may not be less prejudiced, but rather demonstrate their bias in more subtle ways. As it is no longer acceptable to be openly discriminatory (McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981), awareness of socially desirable responding may be salient for emerging adults, who may exhibit less overtly discriminatory behavior that would otherwise be reported as discrimination.

In contrast to decreases in reports of personal discrimination over time, as expected, perceptions of negative public regard increased over time. This is consistent with the argument that ethnic prejudice is expressed in more subtle forms and with previous research indicating that over time, ethnic minority emerging adults become increasingly aware that the larger society harbors negative views about their ethnic group (Seaton & Yip, 2009). The fact that negative public regard increases while discrimination decreases suggests that individuals do not have to

experience overt discrimination in order to recognize that their ethnic group continues to be negatively stereotyped and treated by society. Higher levels of perceived negative public regard over time that is independent of a personal history of stigmatization can nonetheless send the message to emerging adults that they may not have equal opportunity for success and that they will always face this burden of proving their competence.

The patterns of results differed by context only for Latino emerging adults, in that those who attended four-year colleges experienced more peer discrimination over time and had more negative public regard than those who attended two-year colleges or no college at all. Higher perceptions of stigma among Latino students may reflect the fact that stereotypes about Latinos are more negative than the other ethnic groups in this sample. Negative treatment may be more salient in four-year colleges where peer groups increase in number and probably in diversity compared to high school. In contrast, students who attend two-year colleges or no college at all may have stable or only slightly larger peer groups than high school. Indeed, commuter students, which is highly characteristic of community college students, have half as many new friendships than students who live on campus (Buote et al., 2007). For Latino emerging adults, the stability of their social environments throughout high school compared to the instability of moving away from home may highlight differential treatment from peers. The importance of peer groups may intensify as emerging adults become increasingly independent from their parents. Given that peer networks in college provide important support and intimacy (Paul & Kelleher, 1995), increased peer discrimination may impact the subsequent educational and occupational choices Latino students make. These results support the argument that Latino students need to defend the legitimacy of their acceptance into college to others (Smedley et al., 1993), as people in legitimately high status positions may be especially sensitive to perceived unfairness if their

status is questioned (Borrell et al., 2006; Major et al., 2005). Moreover, hostile college climate can affect school satisfaction and retention (Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, & Cuellar, 2008). Colleges and universities committed to retaining Latino students should be aware of peer discrimination's potential influence.

It is unclear why we did not find differences in adult discrimination by context. Perhaps Latino emerging adults, particularly those in large universities, have less contact with professors and other adults in college than peers. Less interactions with professors and other adults may simply lessen the chances for negative treatment.

Regardless of the type of college they attended, their place of residence, or the diversity of their college, ethnic minority emerging adults generally perceived more peer and adult discrimination than their European peers. Although infrequent, perceived discrimination has been linked to worse academic achievement and psychological well-being among Latino and Asian American adolescents (Huynh & Fuligni, in press). Over time, experiences of discrimination may place ethnic minority emerging adults at a disadvantage for upward mobility (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009; Mays et al., 1996).

Additionally, Latino and other ethnic minority emerging adults reported more negative public regard than their Asian and European peers. The finding that Asian and European American emerging adults do not differ in their reports of public regard, despite Asian emerging adults reporting more peer and adult discrimination than their European peers, suggest that Asian Americans are aware of society's positive perceptions of their group yet still experience negative treatment. Consistent with other research (Liang, Li, & Kim, 2004), this discrepancy suggests that Asian Americans are discriminated against regardless of the common perception that they are the "model minority" (Sue, 1994).

Although other studies found that school diversity and ethnic composition affect perceptions of stigma (e.g., Seaton & Yip, 2009), we did not. Perhaps Latino students do not compare their experiences of discrimination with other groups, or, believe that other groups experience more discrimination. Consistent with previous research, males reported more discrimination than females (e.g., Greene et al., 2006), possibly because males are stereotyped as dangerous and threatening. However, males and females have similar perceptions of public regard, suggesting that although males and females experience different frequencies of personal discrimination, both genders are aware of the society's views and perceptions of their ethnic group. These results provide justification for examining public regard in addition to personal discrimination when examining stigma.

One limitation of this study was the small size of those not attending college, which prevented us from analyzing the effect of variations in work settings on perceptions of stigma. It also would have been instructive to have an African American comparison group. However, we believe the focus on primarily Latino and Asian American emerging adults is a strength of this study because the experiences of stigma among these groups are less known. Given the rapidly increasing size of these groups, it is crucial to understand the barriers that these groups face during the transition to adulthood and attempt to contribute economically to American society.

Although ethnic minority emerging adults' reports of personal discrimination decrease across the transition to adulthood, their perceptions of society's negative opinion of their ethnic group increase. This suggests that although overt discrimination does not happen very much, and in fact decreases over time, ethnic minority emerging adults may nonetheless feel devalued by society and discriminated against. Ethnic stigma appears to be a unique challenge facing Latino youth, particularly those who attend four year colleges. Differential treatment across the transition to

adulthood may influence ethnic minority emerging adults' educational and occupational decisions later in life. A closer examination of the experiences of ethnic minority emerging adults as they transition to adult roles will help professionals understand the challenges faced by groups that already are significant segments of an increasingly diverse American society.

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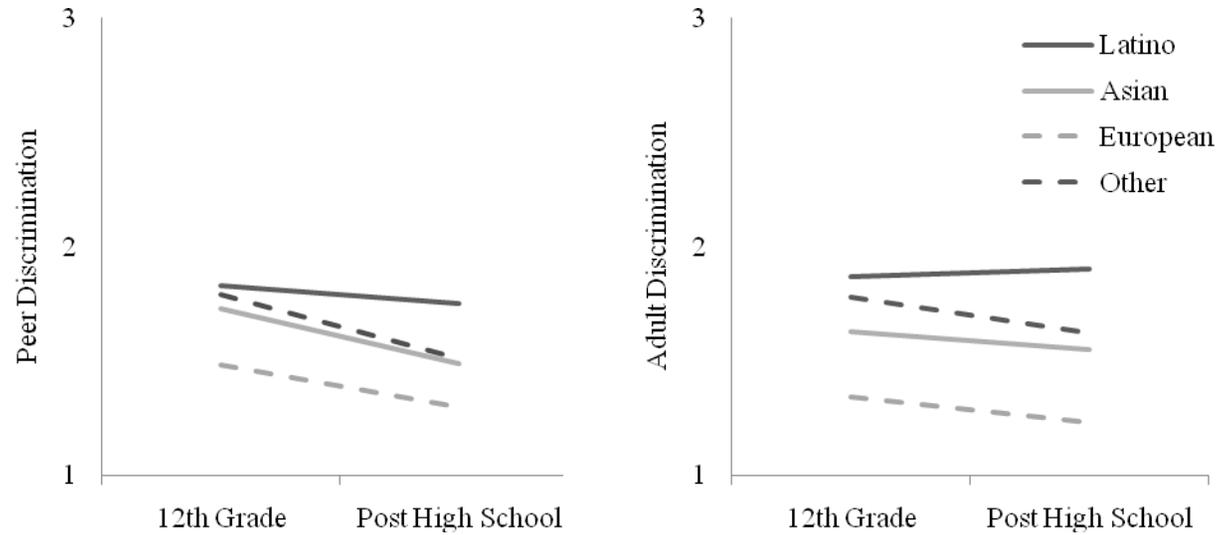


Figure 1. Changes in Perceived Peer and Adult Discrimination According to Ethnic Group

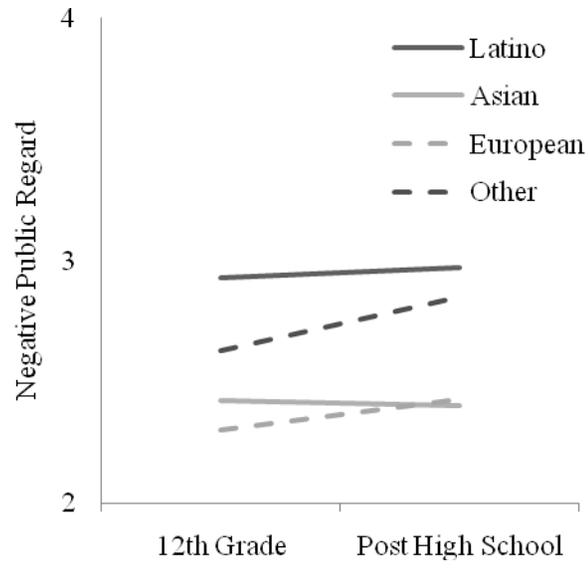


Figure 2. Change in Perceived Negative Public Regard According to Ethnic Group

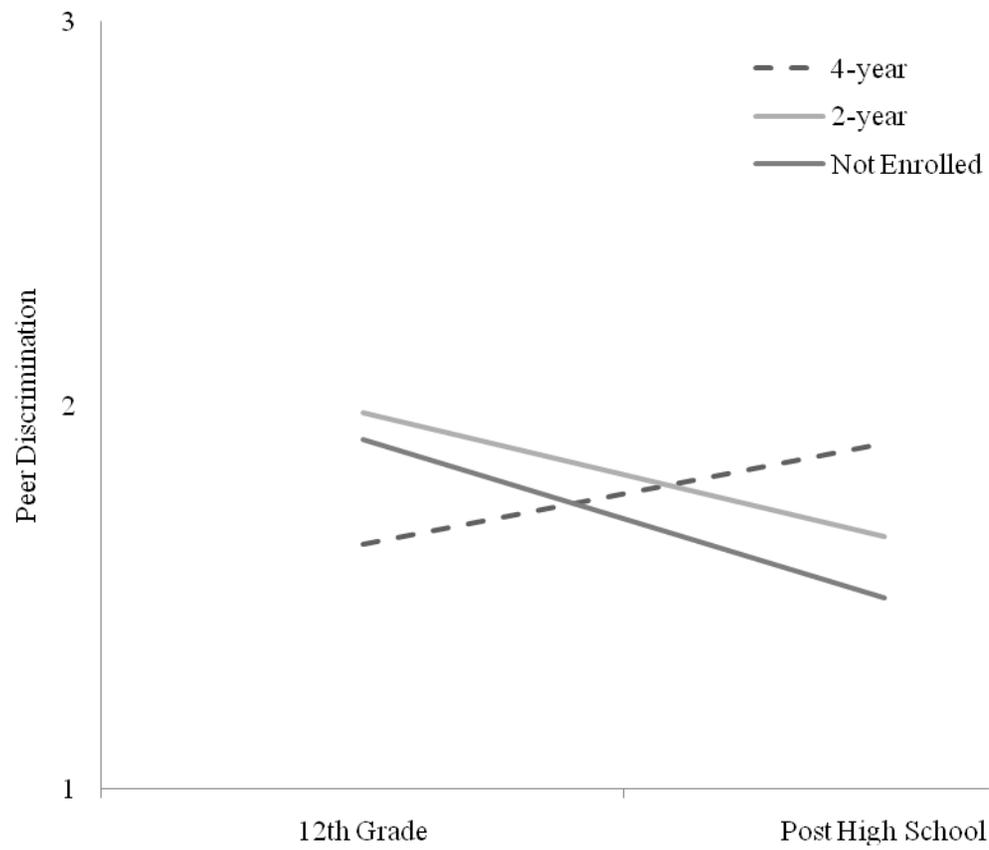


Figure 3. Change in Latino Perception of Peer Discrimination According to College Type