

Racial-Ethnic Socialization: Understanding How Children Of Minorities Learn About Race, Culture, And Prejudice

Among the nation's minorities, the messages children receive about race, culture, identity, and discrimination are an important part of their development. At the same time, the content of those messages and how they are delivered are increasingly seen as important responsibilities of the families in which these children are raised.

Understanding racial-ethnic socialization – how children learn about race and ethnicity and related issues – is a developmental phenomenon of growing interest in the United States, where children of today's minority groups, particularly African American and Hispanic children, are expected to account for 50% of the school population by 2035.¹

Much remains to be learned about racial-ethnic socialization within minority families. However, available research does provide insight into the characteristics of racial-ethnic socialization practices, including the types of messages given about culture and identity, the ways children are prepared to face bias, and the strategies parents use to discuss race and related issues with their children.

Studies also suggest that children can be significantly influenced by the messages they receive about race and ethnicity. These messages, to some degree, has been found to affect children's racial and ethnic identity, self-esteem, and their ability to cope with discrimination. Racial-ethnic socialization has also been associated with psychosocial outcomes, such as depression, anger management, and fighting.

Racial-Ethnic Socialization Characteristics

Racial-ethnic socialization practices within minority families are influenced by characteristics of children and parents, characteristics of the neighborhoods and regions in which they

live, and their experiences with discrimination. Key characteristics that shape racial-ethnic socialization practices include:

- **Children's age.** Studies have found that parents' messages about race, ethnicity, and discrimination tend to shift according to children's cognitive abilities and experiences. In one study, for example, African American mothers prepared their older children to cope with discrimination more than they did their younger children.²

- **Children's gender.** Several studies of African American families report that boys are more likely to receive messages about racial barriers, while the messages girls receive emphasize racial pride. Other studies, however, report finding no significant gender differences in the messages minority children receive about race.

- **Parents' immigration status.** Research suggests recent immigrants are more likely to teach their children about their ethnic origin, native language, and traditions than immigrant parents who have lived in the United States longer.³

- **Parents' socioeconomic status.** Parents of higher socioeconomic status report more racial-ethnic socialization than lower socioeconomic parents. For example, studies suggest that parents with higher incomes and more years of schooling more frequently teach their children about cultural traditions, pride, and how to cope with discrimination.⁴

- **Neighborhood.** Few studies have examined neighborhood influence on minority racial-ethnic socialization, but those that do suggest the more integrated the neighborhood is, the more likely parents are to teach their children how to cope with discrimination.

- **Experiences with discrimination.** Several studies suggest that parents who experience messages about discrimi-

nation at work or in the community are more likely to prepare their children for bias and pass on messages of caution about people of other races.

The practices parents use to address race and ethnicity with their children vary among minority families. The key differences include the issues they address and the content of the messages they convey to their children.

Several themes emerge from recent research that help define the focus of the various types of racial-ethnic socialization practices found within minority families. Some practices teach children about their racial or ethnic heritage and culture. Some prepare minority children for the discrimination they may experience. Closely related are practices that promote a wariness or mistrust of other races and cultures. Other practices downplay racial or ethnic group membership and focus on encouraging children to value the individual qualities of people they encounter.

Cultural Socialization

Cultural socialization is when parents either deliberately or implicitly teach their children about racial and ethnic heritage and history, and promote cultural customs, traditions, and racial, cultural and ethnic pride. Common practices include talking about historical and cultural figures, celebrating cultural holidays, and exposing children to books, music, and stories related to their race and ethnicity.

Promoting cultural knowledge, pride, and traditions is a key aspect of child rearing among minority parents, studies suggest. Among African Americans, for example, the percentage of parents who report engaging in cultural socialization practices with their children range from 33%⁵ to as many as 80%.⁶ Among ethnic minorities, a high number of parents report doing the same. For example, about 66% of Japanese parents⁷, and 85% or more of Dominican, Mexican, and Puerto Rican parents^{8, 9} report engaging in cultural socialization.

Research suggests parents are more likely report having engaged in cultural socialization than having used other practices, such as preparing their children to deal with bias. Preparing For Discrimination

Another racial-ethnic socialization practice parents have been found to use is discussing discrimination with their children and preparing them to cope with it. Just how widespread this practice is among minority parents is unclear. Few parents report that they prepare their children for bias when asked open-ended questions about their socialization methods. For example, when asked what they taught children about being African American, only about 8% of the adults in the National Survey of Black Americans mentioned messages about racial barriers.¹⁰

However, studies that use more probing in-depth inter-

views and survey questions report that parents do discuss issues related to discrimination with their children. In one study, only 5% of African American parents reported that discrimination never came up in conversations with their children.¹¹ In other studies, estimates of the share of African American parents who prepare their children to cope with discrimination range from 67% to 90%.

Talking about discrimination and preparing children to cope with it is more prevalent among African American families when compared with families of other ethnic and racial backgrounds. Promoting Mistrust

Conveying messages that warn children to be cautious and wary of people of other races is another practice identified in studies of racial-ethnic socialization among minority families. Such messages differ from the practice of preparing a child for bias because they do not offer children advice on how to manage or cope with discrimination.

This is another practice that few minority parents spontaneously mention in surveys that pose open-ended questions about their socialization methods. Fewer than 3% of adults in the National Survey of Black Americans reported telling their children to maintain social distance from white children as a strategy for racial-ethnic socialization.¹²

However, research involving more in-depth interviews offers evidence that messages that promote mistrust are conveyed by at least a subset of minority parents. In one study, intensive interviews with African American parents revealed that nearly one-third convey messages of mistrust of other racial groups.¹³ In another study, researchers reported that there were African American parents in every focus group conducted who had discussions that encouraged their children to be vigilant in their interactions with white peers, keep a social distance from them, and to be skeptical about their relationships with them.¹⁴

Such messages are found among other ethnic groups as well. Several studies have reported that immigrant West Indian, Caribbean, and Dominican parents express strong convictions that their children should distinguish themselves from native-born African Americans, a group they warn and caution their children about.¹⁵

Egalitarian Messages

Some parents convey messages that encourage their children to value individual qualities over racial group membership or they may avoid mentioning race at all with their children.

Although minority parents have been found to use such practices as preparing their children to manage discrimination, studies suggest egalitarian messages are also part of the racial-ethnic socialization of their children. For example, in interviews and focus groups, African American parents said some of the messages they convey emphasize values such as

hard work, virtue, self-acceptance, and equality.^{16, 17} Researchers have also found that teaching children not to notice race is another strategy embraced by some parents, although it is more prominent among white parents than among African American parents.¹⁸

Studies have not thoroughly investigated silence about race as a strategy of racial-ethnic socialization. Studies that ask parents open-ended questions about the strategies parents use report that between 20% to 50% of those surveyed say they do nothing.

How Racial-Ethnic Socialization Affects Children

Measuring how various racial-ethnic socialization practices affect minority children is an underdeveloped field of study. Available research, however, suggests that these practices have potentially important consequences regarding children's racial-ethnic identity, self-esteem, and ability to cope with discrimination, and other issues.

Some racial-ethnic socialization practices have consistently been found to result in favorable outcomes among minority children, such as higher self-esteem, while others are tempered by less favorable outcomes, such as a heightened sense of mistrust of people of other races.

Ethnic Identity

Children's ethnic identity is one of the most commonly investigated outcomes of racial-ethnic socialization and one that has often been found to favorably influence child outcomes. Among the types of socialization practices, research suggests the most effective in helping children develop their racial and ethnic identity is cultural socialization, which includes messages that emphasize racial and ethnic pride, history, and cultural traditions.

Several studies of African American and Mexican adolescents, for example, associate the cultural socialization practices of their parents to more advanced identity development, identity exploration, positive group attitudes, and more group-oriented ethnic behaviors. Among younger children, most studies report that cultural socialization helps children develop knowledge about their racial or ethnic group and positive attitudes about that group.

The practice of preparing children for discrimination has also been associated with identity development. For example, advanced stages of racial-ethnic identity development is more likely to be found among adolescents who strongly believe that teaching about racism is important.¹⁹

Self-Esteem

Studies involving minority adolescents suggest their self-esteem may be sensitive to the racial-ethnic messages they re-

ceive from their parents.

Messages intended to prepare minority children for discrimination and parents' cultural socialization practices have been associated with higher family self-esteem. Parents' cultural socialization practices have also been associated with higher peer self-esteem. However, parent messages that promote blending with the mainstream culture have been associated with lower self-esteem in school.²⁰

Coping With Discrimination

Parents' efforts to prepare their children to cope with prejudice and discrimination have been found to influence how minority children handle such situations when confronted with them. Studies suggest that minority adolescents whose parents discuss discrimination with them are more likely to use effective ways of dealing with it, such as seeking support and direct problem solving strategies, rather than ineffective coping strategies, such as engaging in verbal banter.²¹

Researchers have also found that children's experiences with discrimination are significantly associated with poorer mental health outcomes only among those who do not receive racial-ethnic socialization messages from their parents.²²

However, studies that associate such protective outcomes with preparing minority children to cope with bias are tempered by findings that some children learn to expect discrimination and develop a mistrust of those of other races.

Psychosocial Outcomes

In studies that focus almost exclusively on minority adolescents, researchers report that some racial-ethnic socialization practices used by their parents are associated with psychosocial outcomes such as depression, anger management, and fighting.

The practice of cultural socialization tends to be protective. However, messages that focus on discrimination may result in protective outcomes and unfavorable psychosocial outcomes. In one study, African American boys who believed in the importance of emphasizing cultural pride and heritage were better able to control anger than those who focused on discrimination.²³ In another study, Asian and African American adolescents who expected to be discriminated against had more symptoms of depression and more conflicts with their parents than those who did not expect such experiences.²⁴

Psychosocial outcomes of racial-ethnic socialization practices can also differ between boys and girls. For example, African American boys with high racial-ethnic socialization scores have been found to experience more frequent sad moods and greater hopelessness than African American girls.²⁵

Academic Outcomes

Few studies have examined whether parents' racial-ethnic

socialization practices influence their children's academic outcomes and the findings of those that have addressed the issue are mixed. Other studies, however, suggest that such practices might have the potential to shape children's learning and school performance. For example, positive ethnic identity and high self-esteem have been favorably associated with children's academic outcomes.²⁶

Implications For Policy

Racial-ethnic socialization among minority families is a complex issue and an emerging field of study. Much remains to be learned about this process, particularly in the area of child outcomes. Research suggests most parents engage in some kind of racial-ethnic socialization and that the importance they place on these practices and how frequently they engage in them varies.

Cultural socialization, the most frequently studied practice, has consistently been found to benefit minority children. However, there is too little evidence to date from which to draw firm conclusions about other racial-ethnic socialization practices parents engage in, particularly those intended to prepare children for discrimination and those that deliver egalitarian messages, such as urging children to adopt the values of the mainstream culture or teaching children to value individual qualities over membership in a group.

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This Special Report, written by Jeffery Fraser, is based on the publication cited above. It is not intended to be an original work but a summary for the convenience of our readers. References noted in the text follow:

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Commentary

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Family Resources

1. The article is important to addressing the observed variability in how minorities manage racism and prejudice, and I am glad to see this area explored. Some minorities experience less trauma than others, and the differences rest in coping abilities, and not the severity and frequency of the traumas. What kinds of childhood experiences buffer us from trauma needs to be investigated. The implications are for all children, as many children experience threats in social settings, including community violence, unsafe schools, and prejudice beyond racial bias.

2. Children learn a great deal from watching and observing parents and other family members. They also learn through extended family contacts and experiences. The extended nature of African American families (and other ethnic groups) is well documented, creating a caution that researchers do not use a nuclear family lens when examining how children learn.

3. Children acquire the coping skills used to manage racial and cultural stresses and discrimination through a multitude of experiences beyond their experiences in their families with race and culture, and they apply these skills to specific racial and cultural situations. For example, a large extended African-American family may teach its children to not share family and personal experiences with non-family members. Children will use this strategy to manage racial discrimination without specific and overt messages about race being discussed. The "keeping it in the family" message is related to race and culture as documented in research about African American families, but the parents may have little idea of this.

4. The transmission of information between generations of a family is a complex matter and contextual and content variables must be considered. Content is easier to study and measure. Context is more difficult. My parents emphasized education all of my life, as did their parents and grandparents. I did not know this had to do with social achievement and racism, but as an adult I learned it did. The failure of a

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cousin in college triggered strong pushing for my brother and me not to fail, and this was related to avoiding shame to the family. I knew I had better do well, but this was never spoken like this. I just knew it! My cousin's father still talks about his pride around my social achievement. This certainly teaches my cousin a lot, even today.

5. Racial discrimination is traumatic and we know a lot more about how all aspects of our functioning is shaped by trauma. What parent say and do during a traumatic experience has more impact than at other times. Parenting is not often viewed as having more impact in specific settings, and

much less impact in others. When understanding what parenting experiences influence and shape child functioning, we must take into account that how parents respond to some critical moments may have a greater influence than their overall teaching, coaching, and parenting of children.

6. In general, I like the exploration of the topic, and I believe we will know more with continued vigorous research. I think we should look broadly at this issue for all children, and focus on how socialization impacts specific traumatic events and circumstances. This would tie this research into the stress and trauma studies, as well as assure that what we learn from minorities is made applicable to all children. ■

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of the principal supporters of the Early Childhood Initiative.

"They didn't have to learn their way through the community," Petruska said. "We liked the fact that they had strong partnerships with community agencies, that they had a smart staff full of ideas, that they understood how important that connection to community is, and that they were seen as a trusted ally in the community."

OCD celebrated its 20th anniversary in November. Established as an office of three primarily to facilitate research and education on children's issues, OCD has grown to include dedicated divisions for applied research and evaluation, policy initiatives, service demonstration projects, internal affairs, and administration.

Moreover, OCD has demonstrated the profound impact university-community partnerships can have on not only advancing knowledge of issues related to children and families, but also on improving the well-being of children and families themselves. During its first 20 years, OCD has seeded, planned, funded, implemented, or managed some 265 programs that, over their lifetime, have been supported by an estimated \$250 million in public and private grants.

"Universities are learning that the storage, retrieval, transmission, and creation of knowledge are not sufficient," said Morton W. Weir, Ph.D., Chancellor Emeritus at the Uni-

versity of Illinois and a member of the OCD National Advisory Board. "Another dimension must be added so that the people who support universities can see practical applications of the work that goes on."

Built On Collaboration

From the start, OCD was built around collaboration. Two University of Pittsburgh faculty colleagues, Carl N. Johnson, Ph.D., and Mark S. Strauss, Ph.D., co-founded OCD as a center within the university that would facilitate interdisciplinary education and research on children and family issues, promote mutually beneficial partnerships between faculty and community professionals, and disseminate information to professionals, policy makers, and the public.

Although OCD's budget, staff, and scope of work has significantly expanded under the leadership of co-directors Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., and Christina J. Groark, Ph.D., collaboration remains the vehicle for achieving its mission and the foundation of the university-community partnerships that continue to flourish.

The model for these partnerships developed over time through strategic planning and lessons learned from working within the neighborhoods of western Pennsylvania with families, agencies, policy makers, and others. But from the start,

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