Short Commentary

Teaching African American Children about Race: Fostering Intergroup Relationships through Parental Racial Socialization

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Abstract

In the United States, highly publicized sociopolitical topics such as police-related shootings of African American men and adolescents and societal responses to them such as the Black Lives Matter Movement have drawn attention to how and what children, particularly African American children, are learning about race and intergroup relationships. This commentary highlights how African American parents teach children about their race and how to go about interacting with members of other racial groups by drawing attention to the complexities of parental racial socialization. Points to consider about how African American parents transmit racialized messages to their children are discussed for scholars to take into account when examining how racial socialization influences parenting and child behavior.

Keywords: African American; Racial socialization; Parenting

Commentary

In the United States, political movements such as BlackLivesMatter, "a response to anti-Black racism" [1], an increase in police-related shootings of African American men and adolescents [2], and a proliferation of anti-immigrant rhetoric [3] have drawn attention to how and what children are learning about race and intergroup relationships. Amidst such sociopolitical and often nationally polarizing topics, parents are charged with the task of transmitting racialized messages to their children that will provide the blueprint for their interactions with members of their own race as well as those of other racial groups. African American parents in particular are compelled to racially socialize their children due to their experiences with historical and pervasive racism and discrimination [4].

Parents convey racialized messages in deliberate and unintended ways [5] through a process called racial socialization [6]. Racial socialization refers to "a broad class of parental behaviors that transmit attitudes and values and information regarding their racial group memberships and intergroup relationships to children" [7]. In African American children, racial socialization has been linked to positive mental health outcomes [8,9], positive educational outcomes [10,11], and less behavior problems [10]. In this article, I provide a brief overview of the types of racial socialization commonly used by African American parents followed by points to consider, informed by the literature, about the racial socialization practices of African American parents for scholars interested in examining racial socialization in connection to African American parenting and child behavior.

Types of Racial Socialization

Studies on racial socialization have focused on four types of racial socialization typically used by African American parents: cultural socialization, preparation for bias, promotion of mistrust [7] and egalitarianism and silence about race [12]. According to Hughes and

Chen, (a) cultural socialization involves "teaching about African American history, culture, and heritage;" preparation for bias includes "preparing children for future encounters with racial discrimination and prejudice;" and (c) promotion of mistrust emphasizes "promoting racial mistrust" [7]. Egalitarianism involves increasing children's understanding of their own sociohistorical backgrounds as well as those of other racial groups while silence about race refers to parental conversations that do not address race at all [12]. Use of the kinds of racial socialization varies by socioeconomic status [4], neighborhood [13], parental gender [14], child gender [15] and the home environment [16].

Use of Developmentally-Appropriate Racial Socialization

Research suggests that parents' assessment of a child's developmental level is a critical component of parental decision making about which types of racial socialization messages to transmit to children [15,17]. For younger children, some African American parents view cultural socialization messages as more reflective of their children's developmental capabilities and more appropriate for them [18]. Older children, on the other hand, may receive more preparation of bias messages [19]. Hughes and colleagues suggest that parental racial socialization messages about "discrimination or wariness of other groups" [20] may be more common among older children and teenagers.

Use of Gender Specific Racial Socialization Practices

Studies have found that the racial socialization practices of African American parents differ by child gender [4]. Research suggests that gendered racial socialization, or the simultaneous integration of gender socialization and racial socialization practices, occurs in African American families [4,21]. For instance, some African American mothers provide their daughters with African American dolls and use positive affirmations about their daughters' beauty during the racial

socialization process; whereas, sons are encouraged to behave appropriately in public and speak correctly to counteract negative stereotypes about African American men [21]. Moreover, other studies have found that African American boys receive more preparation for bias themed messages and African American girls receive more messages about cultural socialization [22]. Research shows that African American daughters receive more racial socialization messages overall as compared to African American sons [23]. The discrepancy in the amount of racial socialization messages received by children may be because some parents may perceive their daughters as having a greater probability to succeed in U.S. society [23]. More research is needed to disentangle the nuances of gendered racial socialization among African American families.

Ecological Influences on Racial Socialization

Studies have shown that ecological influences such as neighborhoods [13] and school and education-related contexts [4,17] influence parental racial socialization practices. African American parents living in more racially heterogeneous neighborhoods may be more likely to engage their children in the racial socialization process [14] as they view it as more significant in helping their children develop a healthy racial identity than for children living in predominately African American neighborhoods [24]. Further, parents living in stressful and hostile neighborhoods are more likely to utilize promotion of mistrust messages than parents living in mostly White neighborhoods [25]. In regards to school and education-related contexts, parental racial socialization messages often contain an educational component as the importance of doing well in school is emphasized as a way to circumvent racism and discrimination [4,17,26]. Parental education level also plays a role in racial socialization practices as parents with more education are more likely to engage their children in the racial socialization process [14].

Summary

The racial socialization of African American children is a complex process that stems from a need among African American parents to help their children develop a healthy racial identity and protective skills for survival as marginalized members of U.S. society. The racial socialization process helps children develop expectations for interacting with people of other racial and ethnic groups. Scholars should consider child racial socialization as a multidimensional parental task when examining the role of race in connection to parenting and African American child behavior.

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