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Parenting Practices, Racial Socialization, and Adolescent Functioning in African American Families

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Abstract

African American parents' use of racial socialization messages has been associated with other parenting practices and behaviors as well as adolescent functioning. This study explored the relationships among racial socialization, general parenting practices (*e.g.*, parental monitoring knowledge, harsh parental discipline, and parent-child relationship) and three psychological outcomes (*e.g.*, scholastic competence, self-esteem, and externalizing behaviors) among 103 African American adolescents. Based on linear regressions, adolescents' scholastic competence was positively associated with cultural socialization and negatively associated with promotion of mistrust, but self-esteem and externalizing behaviors were not linked to any racial socialization dimension. Further, cultural socialization was found to be related to each of the general parenting practices. Implications for research on African American parenting behaviors and adolescents' functioning are discussed.

Introduction

Numerous studies of child-rearing practices unique to African American parents have suggested there are challenges facing African American families that impact not only parenting practices but also children's functioning (*e.g.*, Coard, Wallace, Stevenson, & Brotman, 2004; McKay, Atkins, Hawkins, Brown, & Lynn, 2003). The current research was conducted to increase the understanding of the association between both culture-based and general parenting practices and children's psychological functioning in African American families. In the current study, racial socialization represented a culture-based parenting practice; the other general parenting practices that were explored are parental monitoring knowledge, parental harsh discipline, and the quality of the parent-child relationship (*e.g.*, communication, trust, acceptance).

In this study, racial socialization was defined as "specific verbal and nonverbal messages transmitted to younger generations for the development of values, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs regarding the meaning and significance of race and racial stratification, intergroup and intragroup interactions, and personal group identity" (Lesane-Brown, 2006, p. 400). Parents tend to combine one or more of the following strategies to achieve their goals of racial socialization: expose children to cultural practices and objects; instill pride and knowledge about African Americas; and discuss how to cope with discrimination and excel in mainstream society (Hughes *et al.*, 2006). Hughes and

Johnson (2001) emphasize parents' behaviors and attitudes in educating their children about race. This conceptualization of racial socialization consists of three dimensions: cultural socialization, preparation for bias, and promotion of mistrust. Cultural socialization messages consist of beliefs, experiences, and behaviors that are unique to African Americans (*e.g.*, discussions about American enslavement of Africans). Preparation for bias is defined as parents' efforts to make their children aware of discrimination and prepare them to cope with it. Promotion of mistrust refers to parents' practices that emphasize the need for their children to be wary and distrustful of certain interracial interactions.

Much of the current literature suggests associations between certain dimensions of racial socialization and adolescent functioning, although the directions of those associations vary. Regarding academic-related outcomes, Bennett (2006) found that racial socialization was not significantly related to school engagement (*e.g.*, adolescents' reports if they have made the honor role or are a part of student council/government). Yet, other authors have found a positive relationship between racial-ethnic pride and higher test scores (Smith, Atkins, & Connell, 2003). Adolescent females who reported high levels of protective and proactive racial socialization messages from their parents had a more positive mood, higher self-esteem, and less instrumental helplessness. However, the reverse was found among adolescent males, where the more they endorsed high levels of sad mood, low self-esteem, and more instrumental helplessness, the more they endorsed high levels of protective and proactive racial socialization messages from their parents (Stevenson *et al.*, 1997). In another study, cultural pride reinforcement socialization messages by parents were positively associated with higher adolescent peer self-esteem (Constantine and Blackmon, 2002) and negatively associated with externalizing problems in boys, but not in girls (Caughy, *O'Campo, Randolph, and Nickerson*, 2002). Further, adolescent boys who reported receiving preparation for bias and cultural socialization messages reported lower levels of fighting frequency and initiation (Stevenson, Herrero-Taylor, Cameron, & Davis, 2002). Thus, the findings to date are mixed, suggesting the need to explore how each dimension of racial socialization is linked to specific adolescent outcomes.

While racial socialization is conceptualized as a cluster of cultural-specific parenting behaviors that occur frequently in African American families, similar to other families, parental monitoring, harsh discipline, and parent-child relationship are also central parenting dimensions among African Americans (*e.g.*, Garcia Coll *et al.*, 1996). In this study, parental monitoring knowledge refers to both the practice of gaining information in addition to the knowledge the parents have from other means (*i.e.*, child or teacher report; Laird, Pettit, Dodge, & Bates, 2003). Research with African American families, like with samples of other ethnicities, have found more monitoring knowledge to be linked to lower levels of externalizing behaviors and higher academic achievement

(*e.g.*, Beck, Boyle, & Boekeloo, 2004; Yan, 1999). Parental monitoring knowledge also has been examined as a protective factor in African American adolescents. For example, those who lived in a high-risk neighborhood reported more high risk behaviors when parental monitoring knowledge was low than adolescents who live in the same high risk neighborhood but reported higher parental monitoring knowledge (Cleveland, Gibbons, Gerrard, Pomery, & Brody, 2005).

Research on the links between parental harsh discipline and children's outcomes in African American families has often focused primarily on behavioral outcomes in children (Horn, Joseph, & Cheng, 2004). One study found a positive relationship between corporal punishment (*e.g.*, spanking children with belts or paddles) and conduct problems in communities where that form of discipline was rare, whereas no relationship was found between the same two variables in communities where it was a common occurrence (Simons, Lin, Gordon, Brody, & Conger, 2002). A similar finding was reported by another group of researchers where children's reports of how frequently parents in the community engaged in physical punishment moderated the association between physical discipline and child aggression and anxiety (Lansford *et al.*, 2005). As a result of the focus on externalizing behaviors in African American families, more research is needed exploring associations between harsh discipline and other outcomes such as positive socio-emotional adjustment and academic performance.

In the literature, the findings are relatively consistent regarding how more warm and accepting parent-child relationships are linked to better African American children's outcomes. One study found that positive qualities of mother-child relationship, such as maternal support, correlated negatively with adolescents' reports of depressive symptoms, anxiety, and perceived stress among African Americans (Caldwell, Zimmerman, Bernat, Sellers, & Notaro, 2002). Another study found a negative relationship between depressive symptoms and maternal warmth in a sample of African American middle school students (Bean, Barber, & Crane, 2006). After controlling for demographic characteristics, African American mother and father reports of parental warmth have been positively associated with the use of cultural socialization and preparation for bias messages among parents of early adolescents (McHale *et al.*, 2006). However, in another study, moderate levels of mothers' racial socialization messages, as compared to low or high levels, were related to higher levels of maternal warmth, communication, and involvement and low levels of negative mother-child interaction (Frabutt, Walker, & MacKinnon-Lewis, 2002). Further, in another study, no relationships were found between parent-child communication and type and frequency of racial socialization messages (Thomas & King, 2007). There are few studies exploring relationships between racial socialization and harsh parental discipline. One such study found monitoring and discipline behaviors were inversely associated with racial socialization messages about racism awareness, but discipline was positively associated with racial socialization messages about spiritual or religious coping (Rodriguez, McKay, and Bannon, 2008). The

aforementioned studies provide support for the links between racial socialization messages and parenting behaviors, although the contexts and nature of the links are still unclear.

Despite the aforementioned studies, there remains a need to explore how cultural variables may be associated with the parenting practices and adolescents' outcomes. The current study explored to what extent three dimensions of racial socialization (*i.e.*, cultural socialization, preparation for bias, and promotion of mistrust) and three other parenting variables (*i.e.*, parental monitoring knowledge, parental discipline and parent-child relationship) were associated with three adolescent outcomes (*i.e.*, self-esteem, externalizing behaviors, and scholastic competence). Of note, for this research project, all data collected on parenting variables were based on adolescents' reports of their mother or female guardian's behaviors and no data were collected about adolescents' fathers or male guardians.

Method

This study gathered data from 103 African American adolescents (63% female) located in the Midwest of the United States. Participants' age ranged from 12 to 17 years, with an average age of 13.78 ($SD = 1.18$) years. Participants were recruited through several sources including urban, private and public middle schools ($n = 65$), a predominately urban African American youth organization ($n = 18$) and the general community in an exurban community ($n = 20$). Those who had a completed parental consent form were asked to provide assent and then complete self-report questionnaires, which lasted approximately 30 minutes. Participants from the schools were given candy and a pencil for their participation; other participants were given $10.00 gift cards (due to school district policy, gift cards were not permitted).

There were four parenting measures administered to participants. To assess the three dimensions of racial socialization, the Racial Socialization Experiences Questionnaire (RSEQ; Hughes & Johnson, 2001) was used. This is a 10-item measure and the wording was changed from parent report to adolescent report. As such, adolescents were asked to report how often they have received specific messages about their race and/or ethnicity over their lifetime from adults in their family. The RSEQ contains a 4-point response scale (0 is never, 3 is lots of times) and higher scores indicate they have received more racial socialization messages. The RSEQ has three subscales: cultural socialization, preparation for bias, and promotion of mistrust ($\alpha = 0.71$, 0.77, and 0.64 respectively). To assess parental monitoring knowledge, the 27-item Parental Monitoring Instrument (PMI; Cottrell *et al.*, 2007; $\alpha = 0.81$) was used. This measure assesses how often adolescents' parents engaged in specific monitoring behaviors to gain knowledge regarding adolescents' peer relationships and academic and extracurricular activities using a 4-point response scale (ranging from *0 times* to *5 or more times*). There are seven subscales that

were significantly correlated in this sample ($r = 0.58$, $p > .01$) and were therefore combined into a total monitoring composite score.

Harsh physical discipline was measured with the 5-item Harsh Punishment Scale (HPS: McLoyd, Jayaratne, Ceballo, & Borquez, 1994; $\alpha = 0.77$). This measure was used to assess for participants' mothers' use of non-abusive physical punishment. Items asked adolescents how often in the past six months has their mother hit, threatened to hit, yelled, threatened to put them out of the house or threatened to send them to live with someone else using a 5-point response scale ranging from "never in the past month" (1) to "almost always" (5). Higher values on this measure indicate harsher parenting practices of the caregiver. Lastly, the 28-item Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) assessed adolescents' perceptions of the mother-child relationship. The measure has three subscales: Trust, Communication and Alienation and uses a 5-point scale with responses ranging from "never or almost never" (1) to "almost always or always" (5). Trust assesses how much the adolescent reports a sense of security in the relationship with his or her parent. Communication measures the amount of positive and negative communication between adolescent and parent. Alienation assesses the lack of emotional connectedness and involvement between the adolescent and parent. For this study, a global score of mother-child relationship (Cronbach's a = 0.74) was calculated by taking the average of all items, reverse coding the items on the Alienation subscale.

Three measures assessed adolescent outcomes. Scholastic competence and global self-worth were assessed using corresponding subscales of the Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (SPPA; Harter, 1988; $\alpha = 0.67$ and 0.58, respectively). The 4-item scholastic competence subscale assesses adolescents' perception of their ability at academic-related tasks, while the 6-item self-worth subscale measures the global judgment of one's worth as a person. For each item, participants chose which one of two opposing statements were more like them and then decided if the statement is "sort of true" or "really true" for them, and items are scored by calculating a mean of the items within each subscale. The 5-item conduct problems subscale of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997; $\alpha = 0.38$) measured externalizing problem behaviors using a 3-point Likert scale ranging from "not true" (1) to "certainly true" (3). Specifically, this subscale assesses adolescents' involvement in rule-breaking behaviors such as fighting and stealing. Lastly, a demographic questionnaire was administered to gather data on participants' age, sex, ethnicity, family members living in their household, and family's socioeconomic status (SES).

Results

Descriptive analyses of the independent and dependent variables were conducted prior to examining relationships among the variables. Sample size, means, and standard deviations of the measures are presented in Table 1. Bivariate correlations were conducted

to test for significant associations among all independent and dependent variables. As shown on Table 2, cultural socialization was positively correlated with both mother-child relationship and parental monitoring knowledge, but was not correlated with parental harsh discipline. Preparation for bias was not correlated with any of the other parenting variables, while promotion of mistrust was positively correlated with only parental monitoring knowledge. Surprisingly, there were few significant associations among the parenting and dependent variables (see Table 3). Cultural socialization was positively correlated with scholastic competence, promotion of mistrust was negatively correlated with self-esteem, and mother-child relationship was negatively correlated with externalizing behaviors.

Table 1

Sample Size, Means, and Standard Deviations of Measures

Measure	M (SD)	Range
Cultural Socialization	2.00 (0.69)	0.00 – 3.00
Preparation for Bias	1.75 (0.86)	0.00 – 3.00
Promotion of Mistrust	0.33 (0.66)	0.00 – 3.00
Mother-Child Relationship	3.42 (0.44)	1.00 – 5.00
Parental Monitoring Knowledge	2.15 (0.60)	1.00 – 4.00
Parental Harsh Discipline	2.00 (0.82)	1.00 – 4.00
Scholastic Competence	2.93 (0.60)	1.00 – 4.00
Self-esteem	2.97 (0.44)	1.00 – 4.00
Externalizing Behaviors	0.49 (0.34)	0.00 – 2.00

Table 2

Bivariate Correlations of Independent Variables

Measure	Mother-Child Rel	Parental Monitor	Harsh Discipline
Cultural Social	0.29**	0.35***	-0.16
Prep for Bias	-0.01	0.18	0.17
Promo of Mistrust	0.06	0.22*	0.06

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Cultural Social = Cultural Socialization, Prep for Bias = Preparation for Bias, Promo of Mistrust = Promotion of Mistrust, Mother-Child Rel = Mother-Child Relationship, Parental Monitor = Parental Monitoring Knowledge, Harsh Discipline = Parental Harsh Discipline

Table 3

Bivariate Correlations of Independent with Dependent Variables

Measure	Scholastic Comp	Self-esteem	External Behaviors
Cultural Social	0.25*	-0.10	-0.11
Prep for Bias	-0.13	-0.13	0.05
Promo of Mistrust	0.05	-0.23*	0.04
Mother-Child Rel	0.13	0.03	-0.19*
Parental Monitor	0.02	-0.20	0.16
Harsh Discipline	-0.08	0.02	0.17

*$p < .05$; Cultural Social = Cultural Socialization, Prep for Bias = Preparation for Bias, Promo of Mistrust = Promotion of Mistrust, Mother-Child Rel = Mother-Child Relationship, Parental Monitor = Parental Monitoring Knowledge, Harsh Discipline = Parental Harsh Discipline, Scholastic Comp = Scholastic Competence

To explore relationships among racial socialization and adolescent outcomes, Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions were conducted for each of the three dependent variables (*i.e.*, scholastic competence, self-esteem, and externalizing behaviors). Several control variables identified as associated with dependent variables during preliminary analyses (*i.e.*, participants' gender, race/ethnicity, and recruitment location; contact author for more information) were entered in Step 1. Each dimension of racial socialization (*i.e.*, cultural socialization, preparation for bias, promotion of mistrust) was simultaneously entered as independent variables in Step 2. As shown in Table 4, cultural socialization was positively associated with scholastic competence while promotion of mistrust was negatively associated with scholastic competence. Moreover, the overall model was significant for predicting scholastic competence, but not significant for predicting self-esteem or externalizing behaviors (not shown).

Table 4

Ordinary Least Squares Regressions Racial Socialization Predicting Scholastic Competence

Predictor	ΔR^2	B (SE)	β
Step 1	0.10		
Gender[a]		-0.27 (0.12)	-0.23*
Race/Ethnicity[b]		0.02 (0.05)	0.04
Recruitment Location			
Public School		-0.29 (0.19)	-0.21
Private School		-0.12 (0.17)	-0.11
General Comm		-0.46 (0.19)	-0.31*
Step 2	0.08*		
Cultural Social		0.20 (0.09)	0.24*
Prep for Bias		0.03 (0.07)	0.04
Promo of Mist		-0.19 (0.09)	-0.23*
Total R^2	0.18		
n	91		

Note: Standardized beta coefficients are presented. *p < .05. aGender coded 1 = Male, 2 = Female; bRace/Ethnicity coded 0 = Biracial/Multiracial, 1 = African American, General Comm = General Community, Cultural Social = Cultural Socialization, Prep for Bias = Preparation for Bias, Promo of Mistrust = Promotion of Mistrust

OLS regressions were conducted predicting each of the general parenting variables, first entering the control variables in Step 1 and then entering each dimension of racial socialization simultaneously in Step 2 (see Tables 5, 6, & 7). Cultural socialization was found to be positively associated with mother-child relationship and parental monitoring knowledge, while negatively associated with harsh parental discipline. Neither preparation for bias nor promotion of mistrust was significantly associated with the general parenting variables.

Table 5

Ordinary Least Squares Regressions Racial Socialization Predicting Mother-Child Relationship

Predictor	ΔR^2	B (SE)	β
Step 1	0.11		
Gender[a]		-0.18 (0.09)	-0.20*
Race/Ethnicity[b]		-0.09 (0.04)	-0.24*
Recruitment Location[c]			
Public School		-0.12 (0.14)	-0.12
Private School		-0.07 (0.12)	-0.08
General Comm		0.07 (0.14)	0.06
Step 2	0.09*		
Cultural Social		0.19 (0.06)	0.31**
Prep for Bias		-0.05 (0.05)	-0.10
Promo of Mist		0.04 (0.07)	0.07
Total R^2	0.20		
n	99		

Note: Standardized beta coefficients are presented. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$. aGender coded 1 = Male, 2 = Female, bRace/Ethnicity coded 0 = Biracial/Multiracial, 1 = African American, cRecruitment Location – Comparison Group = Youth Group, General Comm = General Community, Cultural Social = Cultural Socialization, Prep for Bias = Preparation for Bias, Promo of Mistrust = Promotion of Mistrust

Table 6

Ordinary Least Squares Regressions Racial Socialization Predicting Parental Monitoring Knowledge

Predictor	ΔR^2	B (SE)	β
Step 1	0.12*		
Gender[a]		-0.07 (0.13)	-0.06
Race/Ethnicity[b]		-0.11 (0.05)	-0.21*
Recruitment Location[c]			
Public School		0.15 (0.19)	0.10
Private School		0.18 (0.17)	0.15
General Comm		-0.20 (0.20)	-0.13
Step 2	0.15**		
Cultural Social		0.29 (0.09)	0.33**
Prep for Bias		0.03 (0.07)	0.04
Promo of Mist		0.15 (0.09)	0.17
Total R^2	0.27		
n	97		

Note: Standardized beta coefficients are presented. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.
[a]Gender coded 1 = Male, 2 = Female, [b]Race/Ethnicity coded 0 = Biracial/Multiracial, 1 = African American, [c]Recruitment Location – Comparison Group = Youth Group, General Comm = General Community, Cultural Social = Cultural Socialization, Prep for Bias = Preparation for Bias, Promo of Mistrust = Promotion of Mistrust

Table 7

Ordinary Least Squares Regressions Racial Socialization Predicting Parental Harsh Discipline

Predictor	Δ R^2	B (SE)	β
Step 1	0.16**		
Gender[a]		0.29 (0.17)	0.17
Race/Ethnicity[b]		-0.04 (0.07)	-0.06
Recruitment Location[c]			
Public School		0.45 (0.25)	0.23
Private School		0.51 (0.23)	0.31*
General Comm		-0.15 (0.26)	-0.07
Step 2	0.05		
Cultural Social		-0.25 (0.12)	-0.21*
Prep for Bias		0.12 (0.10)	0.12
Promo of Mist		0.04 (0.12)	0.03
Total R^2	0.21		
n	99		

Note: Standardized beta coefficients are presented. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.
aGender coded 1 = Male, 2 = Female, bRace/Ethnicity coded 0 = Biracial/Multiracial, 1 = African American, cRecruitment Location – Comparison Group = Youth Group, General Comm = General Community, Cultural Social = Cultural Socialization, Prep for Bias = Preparation for Bias, Promo of Mistrust = Promotion of MistrustDiscussion

In the current study, associations between specific aspects of racial socialization, parenting practices and adolescent outcomes were explored. There were few significant findings linking the general parenting variables to adolescent outcomes. Parental monitoring knowledge was positively associated with externalizing behaviors and negatively associated with self-esteem. Harsh parental discipline was not significantly associated with adolescent outcomes and mother-child relationship was negatively associated with externalizing behaviors. Yet, aspects of racial socialization were related to both general parenting practices and adolescent outcomes. Cultural socialization was the only racial socialization dimension significantly associated with each of the general parenting practices, suggesting mothers who provide more cultural socialization messages have better mother-child relationship quality, have more monitoring knowledge, and use less harsh discipline than mothers who provide fewer of these messages. It may be the case that cultural socialization messages are part of a general category of positive parenting constructs similar to positive mother-child relationship quality and parental monitor-

ing knowledge, and differ from the messages associated with harsh parental discipline. Moreover, preparation for bias and promotion of mistrust messages do not seem to have the same link to these broader parenting constructs and, thus, may be distinct aspect of parenting among African American families.

Also, cultural socialization was positively linked to scholastic competence, which is consistent with findings from other studies which have found a positive relationship between racial socialization and academic engagement among adolescents (*e.g.*, Smalls, 2009). This study's finding may reflect that those who receive positive messages about African American culture may feel more positive about their academic abilities. Of the four items on the RSEQ that assess cultural socialization messages, two items assess messages that are transmitted by reading (*e.g.*, "My family encourages me to read books about people of my race."). Therefore, it is unclear if the association between cultural socialization and scholastic competence is significant because of the parents' messages about racial pride/cultural heritage or the parents' messages on the importance of reading. Lastly, promotion of mistrust was negatively related to scholastic competence and this relationship seems to suggest that adolescents who received messages about wariness of other groups reported less positive views of their academic ability. There were no associations between any aspects of racial socialization and externalizing behaviors, which is somewhat surprising since this relationship has been found in adolescents previously (*e.g.*, Stevenson, Herrero-Taylor, Cameron, & Davis, 2002).

Limitations and Future Directions

The results from this study should be interpreted in the context of the following limitations. This is a cross-sectional study and it is impossible to tease apart direction of the associations among the variables. Also, the study uses self-report data, which have some inherent (albeit, unintentional) biases by participants who reported their behavior. The data collected were predominately retrospective and, subsequently, also contain unintentional biases. The reliability of the measure of externalizing behaviors is low and raises concerns as to how well this construct was measured in this sample. Lastly, this is a homogenous, relatively small sample so generalizations of the findings are limited.

The data reveal possible directions about the future of this line of research. This study focused on female caregivers, but more studies are needed that explore if male caregivers differ in the amount, frequency, and type of racial socialization messages given to adolescents as well as how male caregivers' racial socialization messages are linked to adolescent outcomes. Similarly, emerging literature suggests differences in messages based on children's gender (Hughes, Hagelskamp, Way, & Foust, 2009), which is also an area of further exploration. Future studies that include longitudinal and mixed methods designs will contribute to the understanding of racial socialization messages. More studies examining diverse outcomes (*e.g.*, peer relationships, occupational functioning)

in African Americans might yield additional data about which outcomes are linked to racial socialization. In sum, the data suggest that two dimensions of racial socialization, cultural socialization and promotion of mistrust, are associated with specific adolescent outcomes. Further, cultural socialization was also linked to general parenting practices. Based on these findings, understanding how racial socialization is related to African American adolescents' development and African American parenting is worth continued exploration.

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