An Integrative Conceptual Model of Parental Racial/Ethnic and Emotion Socialization and Links to Children's Social-Emotional Development Among African American Families

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Abstract:

Researchers have called for increased evaluation of the processes that contribute to African American children's successful emotional development in the face of discrimination. Parents' racial/ethnic and emotion socialization have been linked to children's emotional adaption. Although few studies have explicitly evaluated their joint influence on African American children's emotion adaptation, researchers studying racial and ethnic socialization have indirectly incorporated emotion socialization through evaluating parents' guided emotion regulation strategies as ways to cope with discrimination. Similarly, researchers who study emotion socialization have described emotion socialization practices among African American parents as intentionally preparing children for racial bias regarding how others perceive their emotions. In this article, we synthesize two separate and emerging literatures—the racial/ethnic socialization literature and the literature on emotion socialization among African American families—and outline a conceptual model illustrating the overlap in the two constructs and their joint influence on African American children's social-emotional adjustment.

Keywords: racial socialization | emotion socialization | African American

Article:

African American children of all ages experience various forms of racism, including bias from teachers, denigrating cultural stereotypes, and rejection by peers,[1, 2] which harms their social-emotional adjustment. One way racial adversity affects development is through emotional distress and reactivity.[3] Accordingly, researchers have called for increased evaluation of

processes that contribute to children's successful emotional development in the face of discrimination.[4]

Parents' racial/ethnic socialization—messages parents relay to children about what it means to be Black in America—has been linked to decreased negative affect and greater social-emotional adaptation and thus may be a source of resilience for African American children.[5] Parents' emotion socialization—practices that teach children how to understand and regulate their emotions[6]—may be integral to racial/ethnic socialization in that parents encourage children to regulate their emotions as a way to cope with discrimination. Developmentally, parents engage in emotion socialization behaviors from early childhood through adolescence.[7] They send messages about race and ethnicity, particularly those regarding racial bias, most frequently during late childhood and adolescence.[5] Because adolescence is characterized by increased emotional challenges,[7] how parents prepare their teenagers to cope emotionally with discrimination may be important. Although less frequent, parents relay messages about racial bias as early as preschool and these messages affect early development.[8] Thus, integrating emotion and racial socialization may be equally important for young children who largely depend on their caregivers to regulate emotions[9] and for whom the novelty of learning about racial bias may be distressing.

In this article, we synthesize the racial/ethnic socialization literature and the literature on emotion socialization among African American families. Next, we propose a conceptual model illustrating the overlap in the two constructs and their joint influence on African American children's social-emotional adjustment. Finally, we discuss the role of family climate, children's characteristics, and demographic characteristics, and we offer suggestions for ongoing research.

Racial/Ethnic Socialization

Models of ethnic minority child development suggest that African American parents prepare their children to navigate a society in which they are often marginalized.[10, 11] Racial/ethnic socialization refers to the messages parents transmit to their children about the significance of group identity, racial stratification, and intergroup and intragroup relations.[12] The most studied components of racial/ethnic socialization include cultural socialization (promoting racial/ethnic and cultural pride and understanding one's heritage) and preparation for bias (messages that emphasize awareness of racial bias and ways to cope with bias, such as through spirituality and academic achievement[12]).

In general, racial/ethnic socialization buffers against the negative effects of racism and promotes positive racial/ethnic identity and self-esteem, and it lessens internalizing and externalizing problems.[13] However, whereas cultural socialization has been linked consistently to positive adaptation, in some studies, preparation for bias has either no effect or contributes to social-emotional problems by promoting helplessness and resentment.[8, 14]

Variation in whether and how parents pair such messages with other racial/ethnic socialization strategies may explain inconsistent findings regarding preparation for bias. Recent studies find that a multifaceted approach to racial/ethnic socialization, incorporating cultural socialization with preparation for bias (both the awareness and coping dimensions), may be most beneficial to

promoting positive outcomes.[15, 16] The effectiveness of racial/ethnic socialization messages may also depend on how parents couple such messages with practices that teach children how to understand and regulate their emotions,[17] skills paramount to coping with distress such as that caused by racial bias.[18]

Emotion Socialization

Emotion socialization is comprised of verbal and nonverbal practices that facilitate children's emotional development by helping them understand and regulate their emotions.[6]. Parents' responses to children's negative emotions (e.g., anger, fear, sadness) are important because experiencing these emotions is more challenging than experiencing positive emotions.[19] When parents offer supportive responses to negative emotions (e.g., validation, expressive encouragement, problem solving, comfort), it promotes emotional well being by enabling children to accept and manage their negative emotions.[20, 21] Conversely, when parents discourage children from expressing emotions through punitive responses (e.g., sending the child to his or her room) or minimizing responses (e.g., "don't get so upset"), children learn to suppress their overt emotions but may still become physiologically aroused without developing the skills to regulate their emotions.[19] Thus, researchers have labeled punitive and minimizing responses as nonsupportive.

However, these findings are largely based on the experiences of European American families. In emerging studies evaluating emotion socialization in diverse groups, racial/ethnic differences appear in the use of nonsupportive strategies and their effect on development. Specifically, African American mothers, especially those of boys, are more likely than European American mothers to punish and minimize displays of negative emotions.[22] Furthermore, nonsupportive responses may not be as detrimental to African American children's adaptation and have even been linked to less aggression.[23] Similarly, encouraging children to express negative emotions has been linked consistently to positive outcomes among European American children but to less competent interactions with peers for African American children.[24]

Contrary to findings indicating that African American parents are more likely to offer nonsupportive responses to their children, other research indicates that African American families value the open expression of both positive and negative emotions.[10, 25] Furthermore, compared with parents of other racial/ethnic groups, African American parents talk more often about positive and negative emotions (using *emotion talk,* they label emotions and discuss their causes and consequences[26]).

Given the context of discrimination African American families must navigate, researchers postulate that African American parents may approach emotion socialization in a nuanced way, using supportive and nonsupportive practices together to give their children the skills to understand and regulate their emotions and the flexibility to suppress them in racially biased situations when expressing negative emotions may be harmful.[17, 27] Accordingly, practices traditionally considered nonsupportive (i.e., those that are punitive and minimizing) might actually be supportive; that is, they may be protective and culturally adaptive for African American families.[28] Henceforth, we label punitive and minimizing practices as suppression responses to reflect more accurately the protective goals of African American families.

An Integrative Model of Racial/Ethnic and Emotion Socialization

Boykin and Toms's[10] triple quandary theory, a framework used to study racial/ethnic socialization, describes the need for African American families to negotiate simultaneously and effectively three social contexts: the Black cultural experience, the mainstream, and their position as a marginalized ethnic minority group. Although African American culture developed from merging traditional African and American values and ways of life, culture is also shaped by the racial/ethnic social-political context (in which African Americans are marginalized) and adaptation to that context. Some components of the minority experience cannot be separated from the cultural experience. Likewise, to navigate the mainstream effectively, Black families must be aware of the dominant culture's perceptions of them as subordinate. Thus, in our conceptualization of emotion socialization as adaptive racial coping, we illustrate how Black families may socialize emotionally in ways that allow all three contexts to be navigated simultaneously.

Racial/Ethnic and Emotion Socialization as Overlapping Constructs

Although racial/ethnic socialization and emotion socialization tend to be studied separately, they likely overlap. Emotion socialization may be integral to African American parents' broader strategies to protect children from bias[29, 30] and thus may fall under the preparation for bias dimension of adaptive coping strategies to overcome racism. For example, parents use suppression strategies, such as telling children to take a neutral emotional stance (e.g., "control your anger") to facilitate smooth interracial interactions with authority figures and emotionally process racism-related events.[29, 31] Accordingly, studying African American parents' emotion socialization practices as an emotion-centered coping dimension of preparation for bias may provide insight into parents' use of such strategies and children's social-emotional adjustment.

African American children's normative expressions of emotions, particularly those of boys, are consistently perceived by mainstream adults as more aggressive and threatening than those of non-Black children.[32] Such biases stem from a social-political history of racial stratification in the United States, where the actions of Black individuals tend to be hypercriminalized. Similar to racial/ethnic socialization, suppression responses and heightened levels of emotion talk among African American families likely reflect adaptive intergenerational child-rearing strategies that come from historic and current oppression.[28, 33] In addition to transmitting their own culturally influenced values of free emotional expressivity, African American parents may engage simultaneously in suppression strategies to reduce their children's negative expressivity and the subsequent negative bias of others (e.g., teachers and law enforcement), allowing for more harmonious interracial interactions in the mainstream.[25, 29] Suppression strategies are likely also embedded within the African American cultural value of respect for elders, which teaches children about the importance of complying with rules and expectations within the family context, a value that facilitates interactions with mainstream adults where the consequences of violating rules carry greater risks.[34] Similarly, African American parents' emotion talk, a communication style with a high degree of verbal and kinesthetic (e.g., movement, verve, and tone) emotional expressivity, may arise from both the cultural and the minority experience. This emotionally rich communication style may heighten children's awareness and understanding of

their own and others' emotions, enabling them to navigate intraracial and interracial interactions more successfully by monitoring their emotions vigilantly.[33]

Emotion socialization that simultaneously considers a value of all emotions and the minority experience may be highly nuanced with regulation strategies for different contexts such as private versus public and peer versus authority, and may also be temporal in nature.[27] For example, in emotionally arousing racial interactions, parents may instruct their children to suppress emotions in the moment and validate the children's negative emotional reactions later. Parents may also suggest that it is acceptable to express anger at home but not in public or with authority figures.[25] Such a nuanced approach may allow children to navigate flexibly, or code switch among the mainstream, their position as a marginalized group and their own cultural context.
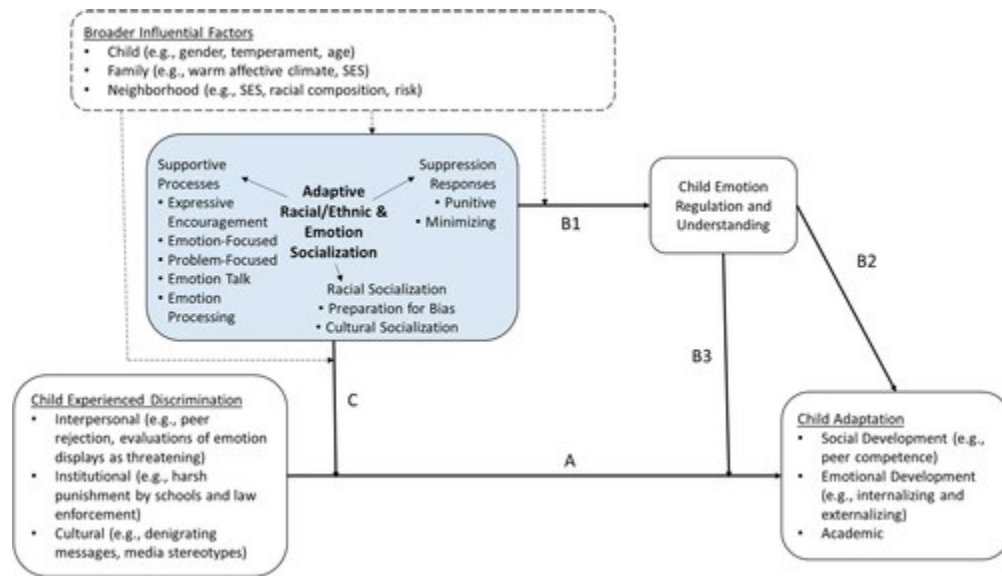
Drawing from this framework, the aspects of emotion socialization that may fall under the coping dimension of preparation for bias are those that have been cultivated from the historical context of oppression and that prepare children for adaptation in this context. We label these aspects *emotion-centered racial coping*. These include suppression responses to children's negative emotions, vigilant emotion talk, supportive emotional processing of racism-related events, and direct advice about emotion regulation for race-related conflicts. Some forms of suppression are nonsupportive (e.g., abusive corporal punishment) and driven by factors such as family dysfunction rather than an aim to protect, and thus do not fit our conceptualization of emotion-centered racial coping. In addition, while supportive responses to displays of negative emotions that are unrelated to racism (e.g., sibling conflicts) facilitate emotion regulation, they also do not fit our conceptualization of emotion-centered racial coping.

Joint Influences on Children's Social-Emotional Adjustment

Figure 1 represents our integrative conceptual model of adaptive racial/ethnic and emotion socialization. As indicated by Path A, African American children's experiences with discrimination increase their risk for adverse social-emotional outcomes[2] largely via increased emotional distress[3]. However, not all children who experience racism will suffer adverse effects to the same extent. African American parents' synergistic and adaptive racial/ethnic and emotion socialization practices may play a role in protecting children from the negative effects of discrimination by helping children understand and regulate their emotions (Paths B1, B2, and B3). We highlight emotion understanding and regulation as primary mechanisms by which joint racial/ethnic and emotion socialization affects children's development, and we limit the scope of this article accordingly. Researchers may wish to examine other potential ways joint socialization moderates the effects of discrimination on adjustment (Path C).

The effectiveness of either racial/ethnic or emotion socialization in protecting children from racism may depend on parents' synergistic use of both. While racial/ethnic socialization instills racial/ethnic pride, knowledge of Black history, and awareness of bias, emotion socialization equips children with skills to understand the causes and consequences of their own and others' emotions, and to determine how to manage them. If parents alert children to bias by discussing oppression without incorporating adaptive emotion socialization strategies, such alertness may inadvertently exacerbate the effect of racism by heightening children's ability to perceive bias

without the ability to cope with the negative emotional arousal such experiences tend to confer. This may lead to prolonged emotional reactivity and feelings of helplessness as well as later problem behaviors.[14]

Broader Influential Factors
- Child (e.g., gender, temperament, age)
- Family (e.g., warm affective climate, SES)
- Neighborhood (e.g., SES, racial composition, risk)

Supportive Processes
- Expressive Encouragement
- Emotion-Focused
- Problem-Focused
- Emotion Talk
- Emotion Processing

Adaptive Racial/Ethnic & Emotion Socialization

Suppression Responses
- Punitive
- Minimizing

Racial Socialization
- Preparation for Bias
- Cultural Socialization

Child Emotion Regulation and Understanding

B1

B2

B3

C

A

Child Experienced Discrimination
- Interpersonal (e.g., peer rejection, evaluations of emotion displays as threatening)
- Institutional (e.g., harsh punishment by schools and law enforcement)
- Cultural (e.g., denigrating messages, media stereotypes)

Child Adaptation
- Social Development (e.g., peer competence)
- Emotional Development (e.g., internalizing and externalizing)
- Academic

Figure 1. Pictorial representation of the integrative conceptual model of adaptive racial/ethnic and emotion socialization.

For African American families, adaptive emotion socialization may occur by combining supportive strategies—those that allow children to express their negative emotions while learning problem-solving and self-regulation strategies—as well as context-specific suppression strategies that equip children with the flexibility to suppress their expressions of negative emotions in situations where bias is likely. Consistent with this view, in a recent study, young African American adults whose parents combined moderate-to-high levels of cultural socialization and supportive emotion responses with moderate levels of preparation for bias and suppression responses had lower levels of depression and expressed less anger than those whose parents combined high preparation for bias with low supportive responses and high suppression responses to emotion.[17]

The Role of Family Climate, Children's Characteristics, and Demographics

The extent to which parents engage in specific racial/ethnic and emotion socialization practices and their joint effects on children's development may depend on the broader emotional climate in which such practices occur, children's characteristics (e.g., temperament, age, and gender), and demographic characteristics such as socioeconomic status and neighborhood risk (e.g., safety concerns, police presence) and racial composition. In the context of a warm and supportive relationship, children develop more adaptive emotion regulation,[35] preparation for bias is linked to positive adjustment,[36] and suppression responses are unrelated to maladjustment.[37] Emotional climate may be important in two ways: First, when parents use suppression responses in a warm, supportive context, children may interpret these practices positively.[38] Second, when faced with biased experiences, children with a warm family climate may be more likely to turn to their

family as a source of support.[39] Without this positive context, suppression practices and frequent talk of bias might be maladaptive.

Regarding children's characteristics, socialization influences the social-emotional development of temperamentally reactive children who lack the innate propensity for regulation.[40] Such children may also be most reactive to experiences and discussions of bias. Thus, parents of reactive children may need to engage in adaptive racial/ethnic and emotion socialization strategies that bolster children's regulatory capacities.

For children in early and middle childhood, African American parents place less emphasis on preparation for bias and more emphasis on cultural socialization and bolstering children's development of emotion competencies through high levels of supportive responses and moderate levels of suppression responses to negative emotion.[5, 24] During adolescence, parents have greater expectations for adolescents' autonomy in managing distress and respond to negative emotions more punitively.[7] African American parents also increase preparation for bias during adolescence.[5]

Although parents may emphasize different components of racial/ethnic and emotion socialization based on their children's developmental needs, the combined approach should be adaptive throughout development, particularly during major transitions. For example, when children start school, the risk of experiencing bias from teachers and administrators can have profound consequences for children's social-emotional and academic success.[41] Because young children do not understand the nuances of racism, low-level preparation for bias that emphasizes emotion socialization may provide them with basic awareness while equipping them with the regulation tools needed if and when they experience bias. The transition to adolescence is characterized by biological changes that exacerbate experiences of negative emotions, and most youth's more adult-like appearance can lead to perceptions that their emotional displays are threatening.[7] Thus, greater emphasis on preparation for bias and suppression responses may help youth process experiences of racism and subvert consequences that may arise from emotional reactivity.

Regarding gender, parents believe sons are more likely than daughters to experience overt racism and adverse consequences for displaying negative emotions, so they seem to prepare boys to be aware of bias and to suppress emotions more than girls.[22, 42] This heightened focus may be necessary for boys' adaptation and survival given harsh disciplinary treatment of Black boys by school officials and law enforcement.[41] However, focusing on suppression without allowing boys a mechanism for emotional expression may be equally detrimental to psychological health.[30]

Parents of greater socioeconomic status engage in greater cultural socialization than their lower-income counterparts,[5] and higher education has been linked with greater supportive responses to negative emotions,[43] indicating that lack of economic resources or social capital may inhibit parents' ability to practice balanced racial/ethnic and emotion socialization. Parents living in low-income, high-risk neighborhoods whose children may encounter racially biased law enforcement officials may want to warn their children about such encounters and instruct them to suppress their negative emotions to subvert potentially life-or-death confrontations.[29] Similarly, children living in racially heterogeneous neighborhoods are likely to encounter emotionally arousing instances of racism from non-Black peers, teachers, and administrators. In such

instances, being aware of bias without adaptive emotional responses may contribute to escalated encounters with long-term consequences (e.g., suspension, expulsion) and prolonged dysregulation after an encounter.

Looking Ahead and Conclusion

Researchers should examine how African American families teach their children about racial bias and emotional coping, considering heterogeneity of experiences and sociocultural influences (e.g., discrimination, ethnic identity, and respect for elders). Moreover, other marginalized racial/ethnic and religious youth—in the United States and internationally (e.g., Native American, Latino American, African, Caribbean, and Muslim)—are also targets of discrimination. For example, Muslims in the western world (e.g., Europe and the United States), particularly those of Middle Eastern heritage, are increasingly targets of Islamophobia.[44] However, little is known about if, when, or how Muslim parents warn their children about religious bias and regulation strategies in the face of bias. Researchers should examine how such marginalized groups prepare children emotionally for bias using models and theories specific to each group's unique social-political context and cultural values surrounding emotional expression.

Furthermore, emotion socialization measures using hypothetical vignettes to gauge parents' responses to children's negative emotions do not include situations related to racial bias (e.g., race-based bullying and peer rejection). Although parents' responses to children's negative emotions in general may be similar to their responses to race-related situations, researchers should evaluate socialization related to general and race-related scenarios, and examine how they relate to one another. Similarly, measures of racial/ethnic socialization can include items to capture emotion-specific coping strategies directly. Observational measures of racial/ethnic socialization may capture verbal and nonverbal emotional communication and strategies involved in racial/ethnic socialization.[45]

In this article, we recognize the need for more research evaluating processes that promote African American children's social-emotional adaptation,[4] and have responded by outlining a conceptual model of racial/ethnic and emotion socialization. In this model, we describe racial/ethnic and emotion socialization as parenting strategies implemented with the same underlying goal: to protect children from the harmful effects of discrimination. In conclusion, parents' adaptive racial/ethnic and emotion socialization and children's subsequent emotion skills may serve as sources of resilience and positive adaptation in the face of discrimination. As research on the topic of adaptive racial and emotion socialization develops and researchers understand more fully which practices lead to children's optimal regulation across contexts, we may identify important implications for interventions that disrupt the process of psychological harm due to discrimination by helping parents adopt these practices.

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