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## From Racial Discrimination to Substance Use: The Buffering Effects of Racial Socialization

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### Abstract

The experience of race-based discrimination may place African American youth at risk for substance use initiation and substance use disorders. This article examines the potential of parental racial socialization—a process by which parents convey messages to their children about race—to protect against the impact of racial discrimination on substance use outcomes. Focusing on stress as a major precipitating factor in substance use, the article postulates several possible mechanisms by which racial socialization might reduce stress and the subsequent risk for substance use. It discusses future research directions with the goal of realizing the promise of racial socialization as a resilience factor in African American and ethnic minority youth mental health.

### Keywords

racial socialization; racial discrimination; substance use; stress, African American; mental health; resilience

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Recent studies suggest a link between the experience of racial discrimination and substance use in African American adolescents and young adults (Bennett, Wolin, Robinson, Fowler, & Edwards, 2005; Broman, 2007; Gibbons, Gerard, Cleveland, Wills, & Brody, 2004; Guthrie, Young, Williams, Boyd, & Kintner, 2002). Researchers have long suspected that stress is a motivating factor in the initiation of substance abuse (Leventhal & Clary, 1980; Marlatt & Gordon, 1985; Wills & Shiffman, 1985; Shiffman, 1982), and indeed, the additional stress that African American youth experience as a result of their racial and ethnic minority status may place them at increased risk for substance use and substance use disorders.

In recent years, *racial socialization*—the process by which parents convey messages about race—has emerged as a “hot topic” in the child and adolescent developmental literature with implications for youth development, particularly for children and adolescents who experience racial discrimination (Hughes, 2003; Harris-Britt, Valrie, Kurtz-Costes, & Rowley, 2007; Neblett, White, Ford, Philip, Nguyen, & Sellers, 2008). In this article, we consider the possibility that racial socialization might protect against the risk for substance use and substance use disorders. We conclude with a brief discussion of several important

limitations in the extant literature on racial socialization, with an eye toward fulfilling its promise as a factor that can promote the mental and physical health of African American and other ethnic minority youth.

## Background and Significance

African American youth have typically reported lower rates of substance use than their White and Hispanic peers (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006; Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2007). Such a pattern does not hold into adulthood, however, when African Americans, as a group, begin to approach, and in some cases even surpass Whites in rates of reported drug use (Herd, 1990; Guthrie et al., 2002). Furthermore, the consequences of drug use, even during adolescence, are often more negative and severe for African Americans. Although African American adolescents report less substance use than their classmates, they experience the highest average number of alcohol-related problems (for example, trouble with teachers because of drinking, driving a car after drinking, or trouble with police because of drinking) (Turner & Wallace, 2003; Wallace, 1999; Welte & Barnes, 1987). African American adolescents are also at increased risk for detention, prosecution, and sentencing for drug offenses when compared to White youth with similar levels of drug use (Belenko, Sprott, & Peterson, 2004; Bishop & Frazier, 1996; Snyder & Sickmund, 2000). These disparities extend into adulthood, with implications for rates of criminal involvement and incarceration (Drug Policy Alliance, 2007), as well as overall health problems such as smoking-related cancers (American Lung Association, 2006), cirrhosis of the liver, hypertension, and birth defects (Boyd, Phillips, & Dorsey, 2003). These alarming consequences highlight the need to be concerned about the development of substance use among African American youth during adolescence and into adulthood.

## Stress and Substance Abuse

Stress has emerged as a major contributing factor in the risk for substance abuse (Koob & Le Moal, 1997; Leventhal & Cleary, 1980; Shiffman, 1982; Marlatt & Gordon, 1985; Wills & Shiffman, 1985). According to the stress-coping model of addiction, the use of addictive substances reduces stress, elevates mood, and functions as a reward strategy for daily coping (Shiffman, 1982; Wills & Shiffman, 1985). Chestang (1972) suggested that racial discrimination and the resultant stress might contribute to feelings of worthlessness, inadequacy, and impotence, and lead to the rejection of societal mores and institutions and the acquisition of deviant social behaviors. Along similar lines, Sher (1991) suggested that adolescents at high risk for substance use disorders experience high levels of environmental stress, which, in turn, results in negative feelings such as depression and anxiety and the use of substances to decrease these feelings. Although there are still questions about the causal order, underlying mechanisms, and strength of the association between stress and substance use, there is sufficient evidence to support the idea that stress acts as a precipitating factor for substance use in the general population (Kaplan & Johnson, 1992; Laurent, Catanzaro, & Kuenzi, 1997; Newcomb & Harlow, 1986; Sinha, 2001).

In addition to the generic, everyday stressors associated with the various developmental tasks of adolescence, African American adolescents may experience even higher levels of stress because of their ethnic minority status. Race-based discrimination increases as African American adolescents become more autonomous and interact with individuals and institutions that may discriminate against them (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Hughes et al., 2006). Not surprisingly, observational and self-report data suggest that race-based discrimination experiences are not uncommon for a majority of African American adolescents (Fisher et al., 2000; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006). Adding

insult to injury, the impact of life events and daily microstressors is further exacerbated for African American adolescents by chronic factors that increase the risk for substance abuse. For example, Black adolescents are more likely than White and Hispanic youth to live in low-income neighborhoods (Anderson, 1990; Jargowsky, 1997; Wilson, 1987), where adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the initiation of drug use (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2007) and where drug use and drug-related problems are often more prevalent (Galea & Vlahov, 2002; Smart, Adlaf, & Walsh, 1994; Wallace, 1999).

## Race-Based Discrimination and Substance Use Outcomes

Consistent with the literature linking stress to substance use, a small but growing number of studies reports a relation between perceived race-based discrimination and substance use outcomes (Bennett et al., 2005; Gibbons et al., 2004; Guthrie et al., 2002). One such study, conducted with 105 Black adolescent girls between the ages of 11 and 19, found that 52% of girls ( $N = 55$ ) reported experiencing racial discrimination. Their perceptions of discrimination were strongly associated with their smoking habits, and the relation between racial discrimination and smoking was partially mediated by stress (Guthrie et al., 2002). In a sample of African American college students with a mean age of 20 years old, Bennett and colleagues (2005) found that even when adjusting for age, gender, living on campus, grades, occupational status, and age of first tobacco use, participants who reported racial and ethnic harassment were twice as likely to engage in self-reported daily tobacco use (odds ratio = 2.01; 95% confidence interval = 1.94, 2.08). Finally, in a prospective study of 897 families, each with a child between the ages of 10 and 12, Gibbons et al. (2004) reported that children's experiences of discrimination were associated with their current and future substance use, children's friends' use, and children's views on risk-taking at baseline. Together, these studies provide compelling preliminary evidence of the relationship between perceived racial discrimination and substance use. In the following sections, we consider racial socialization's potential to protect against the negative influence of race-based discrimination on substance use outcomes.

## Racial Socialization and Positive Youth Outcomes

Racial socialization is the process of teaching children about their race and ethnicity and raising awareness of racism and discrimination, with the ultimate goal of promoting racial identity and preparing ethnic minority youth to succeed in the face of racial bias and adversity (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Boykin & Toms, 1985; Peters, 1985; Phinney & Chavira, 1995; Stevenson, 1994). Although youth receive messages about race and ethnicity from a number of sources, the messages that parents give tend to be the focus of studies and research investigations. Primary racial socialization themes include *racial pride/cultural socialization*, messages that promote pride in the history and culture of one's race; *racial barriers/preparation for bias*, messages that highlight the existence of inequalities between African Americans and other groups; *egalitarian* messages that emphasize equality between the races; and *self-development/self-worth*, messages that promote feelings of individual worth within the broader context of the child's race (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Hughes et al., 2006). Racial socialization researchers have also suggested that *promotion of mistrust*, messages that promote wariness in interracial reactions (Hughes et al., 2006); *negative messages* that reinforce societal stereotypes about African Americans; *racial socialization behaviors*, race-related activities that convey messages about race (Neblett et al., 2008); and even *silence about race* (Hughes et al., 2006; Neblett et al., 2008) are other important ways in which parents socialize their children about race. Together, these messages act in concert to convey messages about race with implications for critical adolescent developmental outcomes (Coard & Sellers, 2005; Hughes et al., 2006).

The positive effects of racial socialization have been found to include higher self-esteem (Constantine & Blackmon, 2002; Harris-Britt et al., 2007), grades, and self-efficacy (Bowman & Howard, 1985); increased group knowledge and favorable in-group attitudes (Knight, Cota, & Bernal, 1993); increased academic motivation and performance (Neblett, Philip, Cogburn, & Sellers, 2006; Neblett, Chavous, Nguyễn, & Sellers, 2009); decreased fighting (Stevenson, Herrero-Taylor, Cameron, & Davis, 2002); and overall resilience (Brown, 2008), to name a few. Furthermore, a handful of studies provide evidence that racial socialization processes buffer the negative effects of racial discrimination on psychological adjustment (Bynum, Burton, & Best, 2007; Fischer & Shaw, 1999; Neblett et al., 2008) and enhance coping with perceived discriminatory experiences (Scott, 2004). Fischer and Shaw (1999), for example, found that messages about racial barriers buffered the impact of racist events on African American adults' mental health. In a sample of African American adolescents, Neblett and colleagues (2008) found that a pattern of racial socialization characterized by high racial pride, high self-worth, racial barrier messages, and socialization behaviors appeared to buffer the negative impact of racial discrimination on perceived stress and problem behaviors. Finally, in a study to examine the relation of background and race-related factors to coping with racial discrimination, African American adolescents whose parents delivered more frequent messages about racism felt more control over discriminatory experiences, and employed coping strategies such as self-reliance, problem solving, and seeking social support (Scott, 2004). The relations among racial socialization, coping, psychological adjustment, and several of the developmental outcomes we have noted here provide initial clues about how racial socialization might act as a resilience factor against the impact of racial discrimination on substance use outcomes. Accordingly, we now consider possible mechanisms by which racial socialization might confer such an effect.

## Racial Socialization as a Protective Factor in the Context of Substance Use Outcomes

If stress plays a major role in whether people start or continue to abuse substances, there are several ways that racial socialization might help African American adolescents who experience racial discrimination (see Figure 1). For example, racial socialization might directly reduce stress, in effect serving the function of potentially addictive substances and reducing the likelihood that African American adolescents might use them (Pathway 1). Bynum and colleagues (2007) found that cultural pride messages predicted less distress in a sample of African American late adolescents. Similarly, Neblett and colleagues (2008) found that adolescents whose parents emphasized racial pride, self-worth, racial barriers, and egalitarian messages together with racial socialization behaviors reported the lowest levels of perceived stress, whereas adolescents whose parents said little about being African American or emphasized negative messages about race reported the highest levels of perceived stress.

Racial socialization might also convey protective effects in this context by enhancing adolescents' self-concept (Pathway 2). If, as Chestang (1972) suggests, race-based stress contributes to decreased self-concept, leading to the acquisition of deviant social behaviors, the positive effects of racial socialization practices emphasizing racial pride, racial barriers, and egalitarian messages about self-efficacy and self-esteem (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Constantine & Blackmon, 2002; Harris-Britt et al., 2007) could help prevent this downward spiral. Messages that emphasize racial pride and self-worth might provide African American adolescents with the personal esteem scaffolding necessary to counteract the disparaging messages (explicit and otherwise) they receive about being African American. Similarly, racial barrier messages might help youth to correctly attribute unfair treatment to external sources, thus cushioning or short-circuiting the blow to self-esteem that might otherwise

occur. Racial socialization practices might also enhance African American adolescents' self-concept by increasing their sense of racial identity (Demo & Hughes, 1990; Hughes, Witherspoon, Rivas-Drake, & West-Bey, 2009; Sanders Thompson, 1994; Neblett, Smalls, Ford, Nguyễn, & Sellers, 2009; Stevenson & Arrington, 2009). The significance of race to an individual's self concept, in and of itself, is a protective factor against the deleterious effects of racial discrimination on psychological problems such as depression and anxiety in African American late adolescents (e.g., Neblett, Sellers, & Shelton, 2004; Sellers & Shelton, 2003; Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003).

A third way in which racial socialization might reduce stress and subsequent substance use focuses on coping (Pathway 3a). The links among racial socialization messages, perceived control, and approach coping strategies (Scott, 2004) suggest that adolescents whose parents actively engage their children on the topic of race might be more likely to employ strategies such as self-reliance, problem solving, and seeking social support, to the exclusion of more maladaptive coping strategies observed in adolescents who experiment with drugs (Wills et al., 1996). The use of more adaptive coping strategies, particularly in the context of race-based discrimination, might help to modulate both the level and impact of stress that African American youth experience, in turn decreasing the likelihood of regular substance use abuse. Moreover, the enhanced self-concept and adaptive coping strategies that racial socialization conveys might operate together to decrease negative affect such as depression and anxiety, resulting in lower substance use and risk for disorder (Pathway 3b).

## Future Directions

Although we have focused on substance use in this article, we believe that racial socialization holds promise as a resilience factor for a broad range of youth mental health issues. In fact, the study of racial socialization processes in the United States is particularly timely given the election of President Obama, the United States' first Black president. Will historical context shape the ways in which parents convey messages about race, and will these messages have implications for substance use and other mental health outcomes? In addition to the study of racial socialization processes in African American youth, we anticipate that some of the hypothesized mechanisms underlying the protective effects of racial socialization might apply to other ethnic and/or immigrant groups in the United States and beyond who experience discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religious orientation, and/or immigration status. For example, it may be that how parents socialize their children regarding the significance and meaning of being a religious minority or having immigrant status might change how discrimination affects youth developmental outcomes.

The literature on racial socialization continues to grow and takes into account factors such as historical context and the potential benefits of parental socialization for ethnic minorities and all youth who experience discrimination on the basis of social status, but several concerns remain. First, the direction of associations between racial socialization and developmental outcomes is not yet entirely clear. We do not know, for example, whether racial socialization leads to positive psychological adjustment, whether youth psychological health influences how parents communicate with their children about race, or some combination of the two. Second, most racial socialization studies have examined parental racial socialization (primarily from the youth's perspective) to the exclusion of other important sources such as peers, other adults, and media. Future studies will need to include accounts of racial socialization from children, parents, and other socialization agents who play a role in shaping youths' views about race. Peers may be especially important to consider given their increasing importance to development as youth age and go through adolescence. A third consideration is the need for studies to examine racial socialization in the context of other parenting variables, such as parenting style and parental support (e.g.,

Cooper & Smalls, 2010; Smalls, 2009; Supple, Ghazarian, Frabutt, Plunkett, & Sands, 2006). Without testing the additive and joint impacts of racial socialization and other parenting behaviors, it is difficult to ascertain whether the effects of racial socialization are due to the messages themselves or to other aspects of the parent-child relationship. Experimental designs offer one possible solution to addressing this and other interpretational shortcomings; however, such approaches (such as random assignment strategies) would require careful consideration of ethical guidelines and principles in the study design. Finally, a number of person-centered approaches to racial socialization have emerged within the last two years (e.g., Neblett et al., 2008, Neblett et al., 2009; White, Ford, & Sellers, in press). In contrast to studies that focus explicitly on the independent content of specific socialization messages, these studies examine profiles of parental racial socialization messages and behaviors. Such approaches are desirable because they examine racial socialization behaviors as a whole, acknowledge that parents rarely give a single type of racial socialization message, and reflect a more accurate picture of how racial socialization processes operate to influence youth development.

## Conclusion

In this brief article, we have argued that racial socialization may prove to be a useful resilience factor against the impact of racial discrimination on adolescents' substance use. Racial socialization processes may directly and indirectly reduce precipitating factors such as stress and mitigate detrimental correlates of substance use such as maladaptive coping and poor self-concept. These processes may counteract the crescendo of racial discrimination youth encounter as they negotiate adolescence, and potentially play a role in disrupting the oft-cited, harmful "catch-up" phase that seems to take place between adolescence and adulthood for African American youth. At present, the proposed mechanisms by which racial socialization may be beneficial are largely untested, and future research will need to explore the benefit of racial socialization against the impact of race-related stress on substance use as well as other important adolescent developmental outcomes. Such work will continue to play an instrumental role not only in African American adolescent mental health interventions but also in mental health and social services delivery for other ethnic minority children and adolescents as well as non-ethnic minority youth who experience discrimination.

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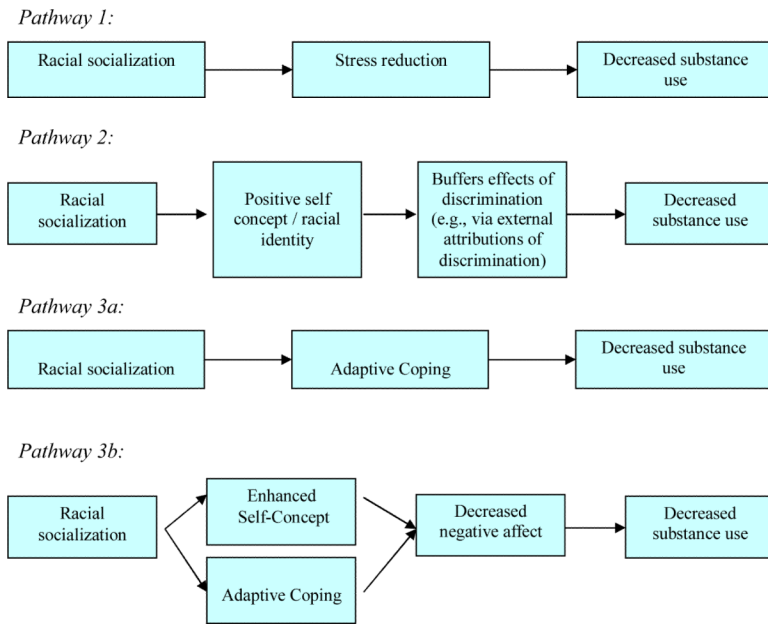
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**Figure 1.** Plausible Pathways of Protection by Racial Socialization Against the Impact of Discrimination on Substance Use.