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# Racial identity development during childhood

Dena Phillips Swanson  
*University of Rochester*

Michael Cunningham  
*Tulane University*

Joseph Youngblood  
*Thomas Edison State College*

Margaret Beale Spencer  
*University of Pennsylvania, marges@gse.upenn.edu*

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## RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT DURING CHILDHOOD

DENA PHILLIPS SWANSON, MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM,  
JOSEPH YOUNGBLOOD II, AND MARGARET BEALE SPENCER

In this chapter, we explore the development of racial identity and its implications during childhood, focusing on preschool through the childhood. The primary purpose is to review psychosocial processes that facilitate competent development of African American children. The overall review provides developmental perspectives in facilitating the synthesis and interpretation of the presented themes and issues.

The chapter is organized into five sections. The first section is devoted to a historical overview of research on racial identity processes in childhood. In the following section, we address the developmental progression of racial identity during this period of development. In the next section, we focus on theoretical perspectives and research that has shaped the field of study, addressing implications of children's racial attitudes on general school experiences and behavioral outcomes. In the fourth section, we address academic and behavioral implications for African American children, and in the final section, we explore promising areas of research that remain underdeveloped.

*Racial identity* refers to the attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs that an individual holds toward his or her racial group in relation to the majority racial group (Arroyo & Zigler, 1991).

Racial identity among children is conceptualized, and generally assessed, as racial awareness, attitudes, preferences, and socialization (Katz & Kofkin, 1997). Racial awareness subsequently influences racial preferences and attitudes but, as research since the 1940s reflects, is also developmentally and culturally influenced. Differentiating between early knowledge of the self and later identity-formation processes provides an understanding of these constructs relevant to children's development.

### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Research regarding the association of racial awareness in African American children can be traced back to theoretical perspectives associated with Charles H. Cooley (1902, 1908), George Herbert Mead (1934), Kurt Lewin (1935), and G. W. Allport (1937). These perspectives provided the foundation for much of the research over the subsequent 4 decades that focused on self-development. They emphasized that understanding self-development represented the basis for understanding how individuals evolve a sense of personal uniqueness as distinct from other individuals. Although these

theoretical perspectives were useful in their broader contribution to conceptualizing psychological processes, they were not generally utilized in the conceptualization of research conducted on African American children. Kenneth and Mamie Clark (1939) were pioneers in using these theoretical perspectives to empirically examine self-identification in African American preschool children. Their research focused on the emerging awareness of the self associated with racial membership. Their initial research indicated that African American preschool boys could identify themselves as distinct individuals from other groups by age 5. This finding laid the foundation for their future work in which they examined preschoolers' knowledge of the self with value judgments made regarding their racial preferences (see K. B. Clark & Clark, 1947).

Between the early 1940s and 1980s, research frequently found African American children to report White (Eurocentric) preferences when assigning personal attributes to Black and White pictures or dolls. There have been numerous writings and studies based on the work of K. B. Clark and Clark (1939, 1947), as well as many replications of their ground-breaking studies involving Black preschool children's racial preference. Their work, which was also instrumental in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, catapulted research interest in children's psychosocial development and racial identity. Although it would take several decades to unpack the processes and the findings, the Clarks' work was groundbreaking and firmly imbedded the relevance and evaluation of race on children's development in psychology (Philogene, 2004).

#### DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION OF RACIAL IDENTITY IN CHILDHOOD

Children demonstrate age-related developmental progression of race conception beginning with knowledge of color categories and culminating with conceptual awareness of racial categories. Early research on young children, however, did not differentiate between their personal (i.e., self-concept) and group identity (i.e., racial awareness). As such, racial awareness and racial preferences were treated as impacting children's personal identity. Children's awareness of race

reflects their cognitive ability to differentiate individuals on the basis of racial characteristics. Children 3 to 4 years old, for example, are able to categorize by racial group based on color (brown or pink skin color), and 5- to 6-year-olds are capable of accurately identifying racial labels based on socially constructed skin color identifiers (black or white). Similarly, children associate socially constructed positive attributes with white and negative attributes with black, thus reflecting research findings associated with their Eurocentric, or White-oriented, racial preferences. Racial preferences were often methodologically based on children's responses to dolls or pictures requiring a forced-choice option between a Black or White child with whom they would want to play or have as a friend. Of particular concern regarding children's Eurocentric preferences was the implication that children internalized these preferences, subsequently resulting in a poor self-concept and self-hatred. Later research, however, consistently documented neither racial preference nor attitude about one's membership in their racial group was a significant predictor of self-concept (Lerner & Buehrig, 1975; Spencer, 1985).

Using research techniques similar to those the Clarks (1939, 1947) used, Spencer (1982a) presented African American preschool children with a racial attitude and preference procedure that was designed for preschool children by Williams and Roberson (1967). Students were presented with picture cards of a "dark-skinned" (African American) versus a "light-skinned" (White) person. Similar to the research with Black and White dolls used by the Clarks, the preschoolers were asked to identify the "smart" person. The study demonstrated that "contrary to previous theoretical expectations (see Pettigrew, 1964), that racial stereotyping for minority group children during the preoperational period is not necessarily internalized to the affective domain or to one's personal identity" (Spencer, 1982b, p. 284). Plainly stated, African American preschool children can choose a "White" image as the "smart" image and not internalize these feelings toward themselves.

Spencer (1982b) further noted that African American preschoolers' White preference is not necessarily associated with their self-concept. In fact, African American preschool children have "White" preference for dolls or "White" images

and have high self-concept. Racial identity is especially important to empirical research. The Clarks' (1939, 1947) empirical research and Pettigrew's (1964) theoretical research on African American children's racial identity association between their racial identity and self-concept, the latter of which was measured. As Spencer (1982b) noted, African American preschoolers' White preference and Eurocentric preference are not necessarily. Recent studies further support the need for variability that correlates with self-concept development. C. B. Murray's (1982) research revealed that Black children's choice behavior between the ages of 3 and 5 years old display Black preference for their counterparts remain Eurocentric. A literature review on self-concept and racial identity in African American children suggests the need to consider cognitive and cultural factors.

Self-concept and cultural identity are independent aspects of personal identity that follow a normative cognitive development course. As development progresses, children acquire greater cognitive abilities and self-concept than younger children. By age 10, children understand racial identity and simple physical features associated with racial groups. By age 10, they recognize self-concept associated with racial groups. During childhood, there is greater racial awareness reported between Black and White children the impact this understanding has on personal identity. Self-esteem is a global self-concept construct that is compartmentalized as children's personality development. Findings of the impact of self-esteem among older children suggest that the formation of domain-specific self-concept leads to inferences that distinguish children's self-view. For example, children view themselves with a self-concept that is valued at home. The school context provides a self-concept consistent with large self-esteem, thus contributing to greater self-esteem. Findings that report correlations between self-esteem and racial attitudes in older children suggest that, regarding racial history a

and have high self-concepts. This point is especially important to emphasize. Although the Clarks' (1939, 1947) empirical research and Pettigrew's (1964) theorizing suggested that African American children showed a negative association between their Eurocentric preference and self-concept, the latter construct was rarely measured. As Spencer (1982b) demonstrated, African American preschoolers can have both a Eurocentric preference and a high self-concept. Recent studies further support the intraindividual variability that correlates with shifts in cognitive development. C. B. Murray and Mandara's (2002) research revealed that Black and White children between the ages of 3 and 6 display White-biased choice behavior, whereas older Black children (age 9) display Black preference while their White counterparts remain Eurocentric. Whaley's (1993) literature review on self-concept and cultural identity in African American children noted limitations of the social-psychological perspective and the need to consider cognitive-developmental and cultural factors.

Self-concept and cultural identity are independent aspects of personal identity, yet they follow a normative cognitive-developmental course. As development proceeds, older children acquire greater cognitive differentiating abilities than younger children. By age 8, for example, children understand racial classification beyond simple physical features and characteristics, and by age 10, they recognize social stereotypes associated with racial groups. During middle to late childhood, there is greater variability in dissonance reported between social stereotypes and the impact this understanding has on the child's personal identity. Self-esteem, once considered a global self-concept construct, becomes compartmentalized as children develop. This process of personality development clarifies differential findings of the impact of racial attitudes and self-esteem among older children. The utilization of domain-specific self-esteem contributes to inferences that distinguish between how children view themselves within different contexts, for example, valued at home but not at school. The school context provides feedback about the self consistent with larger societal perceptions, thus contributing to greater variability in findings that report correlations between self-esteem and racial attitudes in older children. In addition, children whose parents socialize them regarding racial history and values report more

positive self-concept than children who lack an intervention that protects against unchallenged and pervasive stereotypes. As such, older children's racial attitudes and preferences are influenced by their social cognitive abilities in conjunction with their socialization experiences.

Spencer's research on children's racial preferences highlights the need to consider both personal identity and reference group orientation. The Personal Identity-Racial Group Orientation (PI-RGO) perspective has been criticized by scholars who use a traditional Afrocentric perspective (see Baldwin, Brown, & Hopkins, 1991). Arguing that the PI-RGO perspective is situated within a European worldview, Baldwin et al. (1991) presented an Afrocentric perspective as an alternative. They argued that understanding of the self is inexplicably associated with the group. The rationale is that individuals cannot understand themselves without understanding their group. While not negating this perspective, we do emphasize that understanding one's self as associated with a group requires advanced cognitive abilities, which, as previously noted, are not yet developed in preschool children. In fact, the two perspectives are not too distinct from each other. For example, a critical examination of classic empirical studies conducted by scholars who subscribe to the PI-RGO perspective (see McAdoo, 1985; Semaj, 1980, 1985; Spencer, 1982a, 1982b) helps explain the different perspectives. In each of the aforementioned studies, there were preschool children who did not choose the Eurocentric image as the more positive image. One explanation is that the children had significant adults reinforcing positive Black, Afrocentric, or African American images. Thus, when these children were presented with a choice of a Eurocentric (White) or an African American (Black) image, they had the cognitive schemas to choose the Black image as more positive.

The distinction can also be explained from a cognitive development perspective. Just as Vygotsky's (1962) zone of proximal development advanced Jean Piaget's (1929) theorizing regarding what children could learn at young ages, parents and/or significant adults can use scaffolding techniques to foster African American cultural pride in young children. This racial socialization is important to consider when critically analyzing the two perspectives. Racial socialization is also a complex phenomenon and has been critically reviewed elsewhere

(see Hughes et al., 2006). Thus, in acknowledging the critique of the PI-RGO perspective, the research is further suggested as situated within the context of children's development. The evolution of research on racial awareness and preferences supports a developmental perspective demonstrating that preoperational-thinking children obtain cultural stereotypes from social learning experiences, although the more subtle cultural differentiation, integration, and categorization are more directly predicted by later cognitive development.

Two major questions emerged from the findings of earlier research, both concerned with the psychological implications for children that would impact the focus and direction of research in this area: (1) How are racial attitudes shaped and (2) what mechanisms and factors contribute to these processes? The first question has a rich history in exploring the role of racial socialization and contextual influences, primarily within the home but also with implications for other socializing contexts. The second question reframes the literature through the application of a theoretical frame that shifted the paradigm from one of deficit-oriented thinking to developmental and contextual considerations. In the next section, we explore the role of four theoretical perspectives in shaping research and findings on African American children's racial identity.

### CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION OF RESEARCH

Several theoretical orientations have been particularly relevant to understanding children's racial awareness and the implications for their development. Developmental theories, as already presented, afforded the opportunity to explore individual processes that consider developmental needs and transitions. Theories addressing cognitive development, social cognition, perspective taking, and symbolic interaction were instrumental in shifting atheoretical paradigms of earlier research conducted on African American children and youth. Other perspectives—life span, ecological, and a phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory—afford special insights into the unique experiences and adaptive responses of children. They also provide a framework for understanding childhood precursors that impact identity

formation during adolescence. Research studies are discussed within each of the other perspectives to illustrate the application of the theoretical premises but do not necessarily represent the broader theoretical orientation espoused by the authors of the work presented.

### Life Span Perspective

The life span perspective conceptualizes human behavior as influenced by developmental processes across biological, historical, sociocultural, and psychological factors from conception to death (Lerner, 2002). It extended the theoretical focus of historically traditional developmental psychology, with a focus on intraindividual processes, to incorporate sociocultural influences. This allows researchers to evaluate the impact of social experiences on psychosocial processes and behavioral outcomes of African American children. Some of the most prolific work that exemplifies this perspective focuses on the role of racial socialization and intergenerational communication on children's racial attitudes and preferences. Socialization opportunities exist in contexts where children have experiences and receive feedback about the explicit and implicit meanings regarding behavior and expectations. These include, for example, home, school, church, and recreational facilities. For illustrative purposes, we highlight studies that have addressed parental socialization practices on children's racial identity.

McAdoo's (1985) study with preschool children modified their racial attitudes using operant learning conditions. Mechanisms contributing to Afrocentric (in contrast to Eurocentric) attitudes and preferences were central to understanding the process. Parental teaching about racial history and strategies for addressing discrimination influences children's Afrocentric racial attitudes and preferences (S. A. Hill, 2006). Social scientists remain increasingly interested in the nature of communications from parents to children regarding ethnicity and race and the role these communications play in shaping or modifying racial identity attitudes. Race-related messages (racial socialization) contribute significantly to children's identity development and well-being. Stevenson (1994) posited that racial socialization was necessary to ameliorate the impact of racial hostilities and for African American children to achieve and develop positive self-images. Studies

have frequently examined children's responses through two broad dimensions: (1) messages about cultural pride and heritage) and (2) responses to discrimination and racial bias.

Research has shown that African American parents embrace both American values and endeavor to instill these values in their children. Given the challenges explored under a life span perspective, values and history of socialization with discrimination and socialization strategies they use (Hughes, 2003). Black parents value honor, respect, and family responsibility and pass on these values to their children. African American children are likely to embrace cultural values which include kin network, respect for elderly, and mutual cooperation (S. A. Hill, 2001; Murrell, 2003). African Americans emphasize humanistic values and specific parenting practices (Marshall, 1995). African American parents want to raise children with strong values common for all children. They understand, however, that their children will not always encounter the same conditions. As such, racial and ethnic bias report more frequent cultural preparation for bias for African American children (Hughes, 2003).

The life span perspective provides a framework for exploring multiple factors that impact individual development. The focus allows for the fluidity of developmental processes and opportunity to consider contextual influences. Contextual factors provide a broader conceptualization of the influence of context on the development of African American children.

### Ecological Perspective

Ecological or contextual perspectives emphasize the relation between the individual and the environment (demands or presses) and the characteristics of the individual and the environment (Bronfenbrenner (1979) and others). Ecological perspectives provide mechanisms for understanding the interaction of the individual and the environment. Particular

have frequently examined these processes through two broad dimensions that represent messages about cultural socialization (e.g., ethnic pride and heritage) and preparation for bias (e.g., discrimination and racial bias).

Research has shown that Black parents embrace both American and African-based values and endeavor to instill both value systems in their children. Given the historical factors explored under a life span perspective, parents' values and history of sociocultural experiences with discrimination affect the socialization strategies they use (Hughes & Johnson, 2001). Black parents value honesty, academic success, and family responsibility, and they teach these values to their children. In addition, they are likely to embrace culturally distinct values, which include kin networks, respect for the elderly, and mutual cooperation and sharing (S. A. Hill, 2001; Murry et al., 2005). Parents emphasize humanistic values over more ethnic-specific parenting practices and values (Marshall, 1995). African American parents want to raise children with values and expectations common for all parents. They come to understand, however, that although they may raise their children to treat others with respect, they will not always encounter respect from others. As such, racial and ethnic minority parents report more frequent cultural socialization than preparation for bias for their school-age children (Hughes, 2003).

The life span perspective provides a framework for exploring multidimensional processes that impact individual developmental outcomes. The focus allows greater understanding of the fluidity of development over time and an opportunity to consider the impact of contextual influences. Contextual theories, however, provide a broader conceptualization of exploring the influence of context on the development of African American children.

### Ecological Perspective

Ecological or contextual perspectives emphasize the relation between the individual (e.g., the demands or presses) and the structural characteristics of the individual's context. The work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Garbarino (1982) provide mechanisms for examining the interaction of the individual and the various levels of the environment. Particular attention is given to

the constraints and opportunities afforded by the individual and the context (Lerner, 2002). N. E. Hill, Murry, and Anderson (2005), for example, addressed families' sociocultural contexts as including social, political, and economic factors. These broader ecological conditions, however, have significant implications for family functioning and child-rearing efforts (e.g., racial socialization).

In describing contextual challenges in America, Schorr (1997) enumerated "the decline of manufacturing, the disappearance of well-paid jobs for the unskilled, racial discrimination . . . [depleted neighborhoods] . . . inferior and overwhelmed schools and services . . . have all combined to form [places] inhospitable to healthy human development" (p. 305). Additionally, the impact of community conditions in determining individual outcomes has accelerated the need for intervention initiatives.

The complexity of these ecological processes is exacerbated when one considers the growing chasm between wealthy and impoverished families that heightens within (ethnicity-race) group complexities and tensions. Bronfenbrenner (2005) asserted that although these broader conditions influence the social conditions that support development, it is the more proximal contexts that have the most immediate impact on developmental processes. Accordingly, a nurturing context for child development, along with parental provisions of psychosocial assistance and support, is nested in the community.

Smith, Atkins, and Connell (2003) suggested that family, school, and community are each important factors in children's racial attitudes and academic performance. Using path analyses, they found associations between children living in communities with a high proportion of college-educated residents and children with teachers who demonstrated racial trust and perceived few racial barriers. In benefiting from both supportive centers, these children demonstrated more trust and optimism and exhibited more positive racial attitudes, and their racial attitudes contributed to better academic performance. In contrast, racial distrust and perception of barriers due to race were related to poorer academic performance. Similarly, Johnson (2005), using a mixed-methods design, explored the multiple contextual influences of racial socialization on the racial coping outcomes of African American children and found similar results.

The studies presented here not only emphasize the breadth of empirical options, particularly when focusing on the same context, but also note the importance of specificity in reporting contextual details relevant to understanding children's racial attitudes in ecologically based research. In expanding the ecological perspective, a comprehensive theory that accounts for normative developmental processes and specific risks faced by African Americans is presented in Spencer's (1995, 1999, 2006) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) model which situates human development in cultural context.

### Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory

PVEST integrates an explicitly phenomenological perspective with Bronfenbrenner's (1989) ecological systems theory, linking context with perception. In determining how African American children view and comprehend family, peer, and societal expectations, various theoretical positions—including psychosocial, ecological, self-organizational, and phenomenological models—are integrated, with an emphasis on self-appraisal processes relevant to the children's racial identity development (Swanson, Spencer, & Peterson, 1998). The approach takes into account structural and contextual barriers to identity formation and their implication for psychological processes, such as self-appraisal. It consists of five components (see Figure 20.1) linked by bidirectional processes; conceptualized as systems theory, it is a cyclic, recursive model that describes identity development throughout the life course.

The first component of PVEST, *net vulnerability level*, represents risk contributors and protective factors that may predispose children to adverse outcomes. The net balance between risk contributors and proactive factors is inextricably linked to social-cognitive abilities that provide the framework for interpreting external information (detailed in Figure 20.2). Children have the capacity to interpret societal assumptions and biases about what it means to be African American, male or female, or overweight. The research, as previously noted, has demonstrated the undifferentiated cognitive processing of preschool children that is subsequently not integrated into the concept of the self. With cognitive maturation, however, children's capacity to internalize biases

increases unless there is active (and consistent) intervention to minimize the influence. In addition, adults who provide racial socialization may facilitate children's more advanced cognitive interpretations of race and color in the United States.

The second component of PVEST, *net stress engagement*, refers to experiences that challenge (i.e., produce dissonance, e.g., being called a racial epithet) or support children in negotiating the risks encountered (i.e., preparation for bias). During childhood, this has been most directly linked to parental socialization (both racial and gender) and to incorporation of culturally relevant materials and activities into children's school experiences (e.g., positive African American images in textbooks). Adaptive strategies are important for minority-status individuals independent of age; however, the potential consequences are significant during the middle to late childhood years because of the foundation they provide for successfully addressing developmental needs during adolescence.

Net stress engagement contributes to *reactive coping strategies* as adaptive or maladaptive. Children whose challenges outweigh their support might adopt maladaptive coping strategies (e.g., acting out due to negative school experiences). Alternatively, children whose supports outweigh the challenges are able to negotiate challenges of positive Black identity within a social context. For example, as an explanation for the achievement gap between White and African American students, it has been proposed that African American students would do better if they adopted a Eurocentric cultural values system. This deficit-oriented perspective denies African American students (and other children of color) their own culturally specific normative developmental perspective. To illustrate, Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, and Harpalani (2001) examined students ages 11 through 16 years on multiple dimensions of PVEST. The students, in contrast to the traditionally offered acting-White assumption, demonstrated high self-esteem and achievement goals in conjunction with high Afrocentricity. In addition, students with a Eurocentric perspective scored lower on self-esteem and achievement measures. Thus, an explanation for diverse outcomes is explained by using a more comprehensive theoretical perspective that explicitly addresses race and human development simultaneously (see Spencer, 2006).

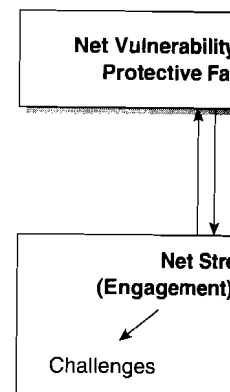


Figure 20.1 Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) model.

Source: Spencer, M. B. "Older Children's Racial Attitudes: A Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory." In *Race and Ethnicity in Childhood*, edited by Praeger. Reproduced with permission.

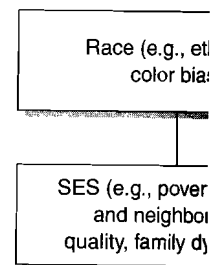


Figure 20.2 Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) model: Self-Appraisal.



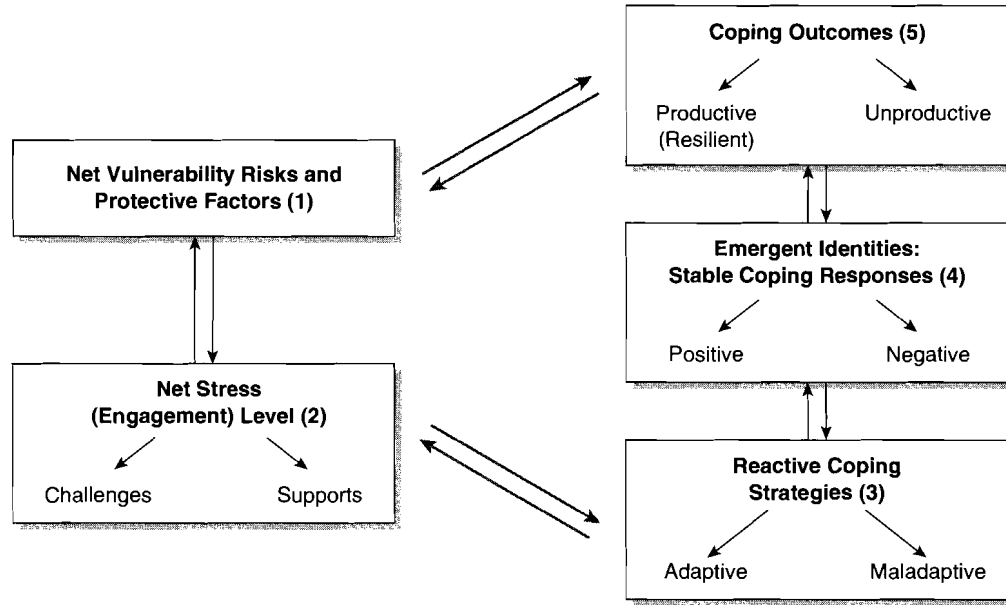


Figure 20.1 Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory

Source: Spencer, M. B. "Old Issues and New Theorizing About African American Youth: A Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory." In R. L. Taylor (Ed.), *Black Youth: Perspectives on Their Status in the United States*. Copyright © 1995 by Praeger. Reproduced with permission of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., Westport, CT.

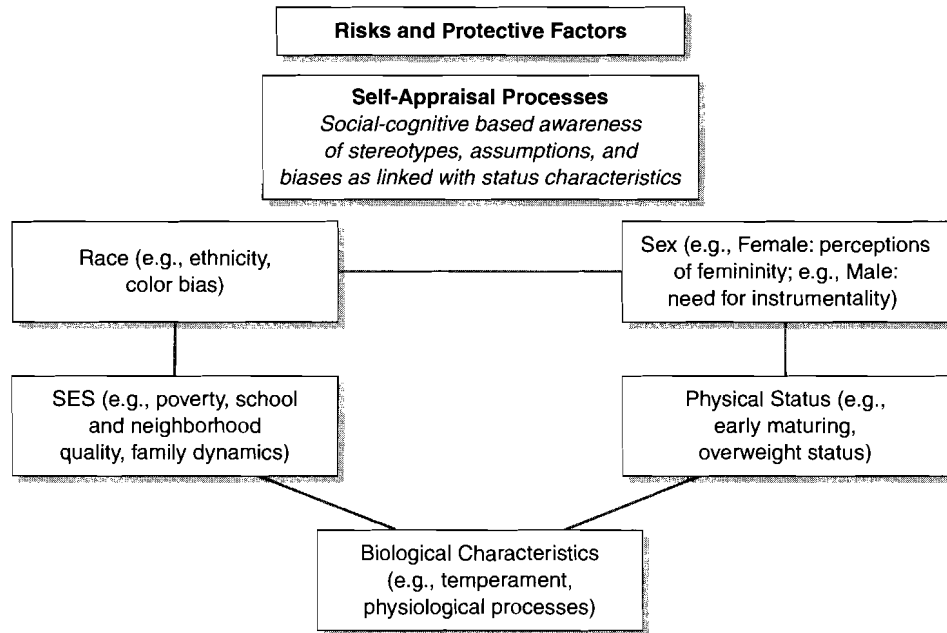


Figure 20.2 Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory: Factors Contributing to Self-Appraisal Processes

Self-appraisal processes impact identity development (*emergent identities*) that contributes to future perception and behavior, yielding adverse or productive *coping outcomes* across various contexts. For African American children, the presence and engagement of structural racism poses risks embedded in their socializing contexts that influence their understanding of how to effectively negotiate within their world. PVEST, foundationally, incorporates developmental and cultural themes with ecological theorizing by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Erikson's (1968) perspectives regarding life-course identity processes. Thus, life-course perspectives of normative developmental processes are relevant not only for research but also for evaluating practices which influence development (e.g., classroom practices, after-school or recreational programming). In essence, PVEST offers implications for understanding and enhancing children's long-term development.

#### RACIAL IDENTITY AND CHILD OUTCOMES

A primary premise up to this point has been to demonstrate the impact of racial identity formation for African American children and the necessity for understanding it from a theoretical perspective that considers contextual influences. Identity formation is the primary psychosocial goal of adolescence, but developing a sense of competence during childhood precedes this psychosocial challenge. Given the cognitive and contextual aspects of competence, two conditions are proposed as relevant for children (Anderson & Messick, 1974): the ability (1) to initiate action and direct behavior within given environmental constraints and (2) to recognize that different roles are required in different situations and contexts and therefore demonstrate behavior that reflects the incorporation of these expectations. Whaley (1993) suggested that the concept of competence provides a more integrative perspective on the interactions of social experiences, cultural factors, and cognitive development in the process of identity formation for African American children.

Academic disengagement, maladaptive coping strategies, and alcohol and tobacco use are behaviors whose etiology lies in middle childhood. In examining the impact of racial identity on children's drug use, Belgrave et al. (1994)

found children's Afrocentric values to influence their understanding drug attitudes and suggest the integration of Afrocentric values in drug prevention programs and efforts (see Thomas, Townsend, & Belgrave, 2003). Other research has consistently demonstrated a decline in children's school general and academic self-esteem beginning in second grade, followed by another significant decline in fourth grade.

Using data from a statewide Beginning School Study (which had more lower-income Blacks than Whites), Entwisle and Alexander (1990) found that the groups were equivalent on academic skills at first grade. After analyzing the data by group, they found that Black males outperformed Black females in math reasoning; however, White males did not outperform White females. Statistically significant gender differences were not found until Entwisle and Alexander considered parents' economic resources. Other research, conducted by Patterson, Kupersmidt, and Vaden (1990), found that Black male elementary students were more vulnerable to teacher ratings of low academic performance, conduct problems, and peer relations than were Black females or White males and females.

Slaughter-Defoe and Rubin (2001) noted how an ecological context is associated with academic outcomes. In following a group of Head Start-eligible children from preschool until late adolescence, they found that teachers had more of an influence on child outcomes from middle to late childhood than parents. Their research echoes earlier research and observations that African American boys and girls have different school experiences. Irvine (1990) highlighted the interactions between teachers and students: "The White teachers directed more verbal praise, criticism, and nonverbal praise toward males than towards females. In contrast, they directed more nonverbal criticism toward Black males than toward Black females, White females, or White males" (p. 59). Thus, by early childhood, cognitive egocentrism can no longer protect African American males from negative teacher perceptions (Spencer, 1985). In fact, African American males become more aware of how others perceive them as they develop into adolescents (see Cunningham, 1999; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003). Thus, identity process for African American children must include both an understanding of their basic

developmental process and how development is a function of gender and context.

The sociocultural context for African American children can impact their productive outcomes. There is a particular need to understand the cultural context when examining academic outcomes and developing effective strategies. The long-term developmental contexts on academic outcomes for African American children are in contrast to the individualistic context who transition into adulthood. A culturally defined identity base and an alternative interpretation of such concepts and integrated knowledge of academic and non-normative, individual development (Masten & Coatsworth, 1999).

#### METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Despite the fact that researchers have differentiated personal and social identity, self-concept and self-esteem, and the influence of racial preferences on academic outcomes. While focusing on outcomes, research frequently overlooks transitions, parental involvement, societal and historical context, racial membership as a factor, and individual experiences. The literature showed that Eurocentric preferences for African American preschool children's ability among older siblings. The history of research on racial preferences, the intergenerational conflicts initially raised controversy of the use of forced-choice puppets, dolls, picture books, and relationship between racial identity and self-esteem (M. L. Clark, 1982, 1997).

When other methods were less Eurocentric, research that used forced-choice tasks (Rompf (1973), for example) olds evaluate the performance of a White player in a ball game. Black children reward frequently, they choose frequently as the winner.

developmental processes and a consideration of how development is associated with one's gender and context.

The sociocultural context of African American children can enhance or compromise productive outcomes. Given such issues, there is a particular need to incorporate development and context when examining behavioral or academic outcomes and implementing prevention strategies. The long-term influence of unsupportive contexts on the future outcomes for African American children remains staggering in contrast to the incredibly talented children who transition into adolescence with a clearly defined identity base. An understanding and interpretation of such outcomes require an integrated knowledge of adaptation, both normative and non-normative, in the context of development (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

#### METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Despite the fact that earlier research did not differentiate personal and group identity, the negative self-concept and self-hatred interpretation of racial preferences prevailed for decades. While focusing on one or both constructs, the research frequently ignored developmental transitions, parental racial socialization, and societal and historical traditions that stress racial membership as a determinant of group and individual experiences. Nevertheless, the literature showed a consistent pattern of Eurocentric preferences among African American preschool children, with greater variability among older school-age children. Given the history of research on racial attitudes and preferences, the interpretation of research findings initially raised concerns regarding the validity of the use of forced-choice instruments (e.g., puppets, dolls, pictures) to explore the relationship between racial attitude and self-esteem (M. L. Clark, 1982, 1992).

When other methods were used, the findings were less Eurocentric than the results of studies that used forced-choice options. Banks and Rompf (1973), for example, had 6- to 8-year-olds evaluate the performance of a Black and White player in a ball-tossing game. Although Black children rewarded the White player more frequently, they chose the Black player more frequently as the winner. In finding no consistent

preference toward Whites, the authors reported no support for "self-rejection" among Black children. Belgrave et al. (1994) developed the 9-item Children's Black Identity Scale for use with a fifth-grade sample. The measure assesses children's affective, cognitive, and behavioral components of racial identity using a 3-point scale with reasonable reliability. Their findings, although consistent with studies that took a developmental perspective, showed personal and racial identity among this older group to have a positive relationship.

In addition to considering assessment approaches, recent advances in theoretical applications have contributed to complexities in analytic strategies. Studies that have examined the influence of various contexts (e.g., multilevel models), have gained in popularity over recent decades. When designing and conducting studies that examine contextual factors, it is critical to address any differences in units of analyses when using this perspective. Mixed methods, path modeling, and hierarchical linear modeling relevant to multilevel modeling provide greater support for using this perspective. In studies that use an ecological perspective, the context should be adequately described to provide information about the contextual level being examined (i.e., meso vs. exo, degree of embeddedness). In cases with a developmental focus, individual factors should be provided to situate the person (i.e., child, parent) within a specific context at a given period.

Recent prominence is particularly noted in the reported use of mixed-methods research designs. Cross (2005) provided a historical perspective on the use of mixed methods to study identity among African Americans. He pointed out that, although valuable new constructs were added over time in the research on Black identity, self-report questionnaires were the primary method of assessment. Multiple ethnic identities and situational and developmental changes in identity are clearly important, and therefore the use of mixed methods extends knowledge of identity processes across contexts. While using the strengths of quantitative and qualitative methods, it is also important to address potential pitfalls by adopting greater vigilance in design and implementation of the research than typically required in using one primary method. However, when approached from a conceptually based framework it offers numerous advantages in addressing the complex questions

now emerging around racial identity and in providing greater translation of the research for practice purposes (see Weisner, 2004, for a compilation of mixed-methods studies conducted with ethnic minority children and families).

### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We have documented substantial gains in the focus on children's racial identity over several decades. Many of these gains represent paradigm shifts and theoretical applications used to clarify the constructs and empirically explore underlying processes. Future research can enhance our current knowledge base and provide greater applicability of the research to practice (see Quintana et al., 2006, for a detailed review). Among areas of future interest, some to consider include clarification of cultural meaning for African American families (particularly given the implications of racial socialization on children's racial identity), influences of technological advances in video gaming, and the translation of research into practice.

Considering assumptions about what constitutes African American culture and its potential role in identity processes, N. E. Hill et al. (2005) proposed the need for scholars to examine the current meaning of culture among African American families. As part of this process, we recommend also exploring what constitutes models of culture that are transmitted to their children. Black churches, for example, have been instrumental in instilling not only a sense of spiritual understanding but also of history and community (Lincoln, 1995): "In the African American experience . . . [religious] belief(s) and practice was sufficiently common to the African American minicultures to provide a framework of reference from which a common identity could reasonably be inferred" (Lincoln, 1995, p. 219). The Black church became the chief index of identification, not because it transcended "race-rooted . . . values and behaviors" but because it was an opportunity to express, transmit, and validate cultural identity. A critical direction is therefore an exploration of what constitutes culture and what context, if not the church, is considered a significant context for defining, instilling, and validating cultural values.

There is a long history of research on the impact of the news and entertainment media on

African American children's psychosocial development. With the emergence of accessible video games with advanced programming potential, there is now a new "context" offering opportunities for children's identity development. Current advances in video game technology now allow children to generate *avatars*, personalized computer-generated images for use in game playing. Avatars are hypothesized to impact identity formation as a potential resource for the child's presentation of the self in his or her social context. Although this research is gaining prominence in the broader literature on children and media influences (Turkle, 1995; Walkerdine, 1998), research is needed to explore the implications of this expanded context on African American children's personal and racial identity.

A final note regarding research direction is in reference to the work required for translating research into practice. While continuing to make institutional and system-based inroads, research scholars can facilitate the translation of the breadth of research for those who work directly with and subsequently impact the lives of African American children. This work is taking place in varying forms, including program development and professional training. The move by funding agencies toward requiring dissemination plans for research findings emphasizes this need. The ability to translate research is particularly appropriate when sufficient research is available to identify processes and outcomes: This is certainly the case for racial identity for African American children. Continuing research is necessary to address effects of social trends, but sufficient data have been available and replicated to provide the necessary translation. We have seen some of this take place over the past couple of decades in children's television programming, school readiness programming, and select professional training seminars. What remains lacking, however, is an ongoing integration of this knowledge into teacher training programs, school curriculum and classroom practices, training for community and mental health providers working with African American children, and integration into higher education courses that address child development. Institutions that train professional and other service personnel can use the research to strengthen their focus and impact on child development.

There is a wide breadth of research available on African American children's racial identity

that contributes to a significant body of knowledge. The utilization of research that facilitates the direct application of research has provided a foundation on which to build. An ongoing effort to maximize the development of African American children's racial identity

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that contributes to a significant basis of knowledge. The utilization of theoretical perspectives that facilitate the direction and interpretation of research has provided a rich source of information on which to build and to translate in the ongoing effort to maximize the psychosocial development of African American children.

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