Race Socialization in Black Families: A Selective Review of the Literature

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Introduction

Socialization is the process by which people learn behaviors, values and beliefs. The goal of socialization is to prepare people to become active, functioning members of society (Sanders Thompson, 1994; Peters, 1985). Traditional socialization theory views parents as the primary agents of socialization because parents provide children with rules on social norms and order (Glass and Bengston, 1986). In addition to providing children with these rules on social norms and order, Black parents face an additional task – raising children able to survive and prosper in a society that devalues "Blackness." Black parents often act as a protective buffer between the reality of racism and discrimination and their children by transmitting socialization messages that prepare their children to deal with racial issues (Peters, 1985). This is known as race socialization. In addition, race socialization includes the process of preparing Black children to understand their unique heritage, culture, and the meaning of membership in a low-status racial group.

The goals of this paper are to: (a) review recent studies of race socialization, (b) describe race socialization measures, and (c) suggest directions for future research on race socialization among Black children and adults.

Review of Race Socialization Studies

Empirical studies in the race socialization literature investigate either: (a) prevalence and correlates of race socialization, (b) content of race socialization messages, or (c) race socialization as a predictor of adult and child outcomes (e.g., racial identity, academic performance and self-esteem).

Prevalence and Correlates of Race Socialization. Most parents are likely to transmit race socialization messages to their children. For example, 68% of adolescent respondents in a nationally representative sample reported that their parents communicated race socialization messages (Bowman and Howard, 1985). Sanders Thompson (1994) reported that 79% of Black adults discussed racial issues with their parents, and 85% discussed issues with another family member while growing up.

Black parents differ as to when and why they transmit messages to their children for a variety of reasons. For example, Thornton, Chatters, Taylor and Allen (1990) exam-

ined how sociodemographic and environmental factors related to the likelihood of race socialization message transmission. Respondents consisted of a randomly selected national sample of 2,107 Black Americans. The demographic and environmental variables included income, marital status, geographic region, gender, education, age, and neighborhood. They found that parents who were married were more likely than single parents to socialize their children about race. Mothers were more likely than fathers to give race socialization messages. Adults living in the Northeast, especially males, were more likely to socialize their children regarding race than adults living in other regions. Older parents were more likely to teach their kids about race than younger parents. Higher educated parents were more likely than less educated parents to engage in race socialization.

Thornton et al. (1990) offered several reasons why parents may not racially socialize their children. For example, parents' acceptance of negative images perpetuated about Blacks by society, or their fear of causing their children to be bitter, angry, resentful, or prejudice, due to race discussions may deter some parents from transmitting race socialization messages. Parents may also feel that racism is less of a problem now and that discussions of race are no longer needed. Other parents may feel that their primary goal is to teach life skills independent of racial status.

Thornton (1997) extended Thornton et al.'s (1990) work by examining the relationship between racial attitudes and interracial contact, in addition to sociodemographic variables on specific parental race socialization messages. Parents' race socialization messages were categorized into three groups: (a) mainstream experience messages emphasized achievement and hard work, (b) minority experience messages emphasized the recognition of racial restrictions and provided ways to cope with having minority status, and (c) Black cultural experience messages emphasized racial pride and heritage. Parents that reported transmitting mainstream experience messages were more likely to have White friends than parents who did not transmit messages. Parents that transmitted minority experience messages were more likely to live in urban areas (vs. rural), were less likely to have graduated from high school (vs. those that did graduate), and were least likely to reside in the West than the South. Parents that transmitted Black cultural experience messages were less likely to have graduated from high school, were more likely to feel positive about Blacks, and were more likely to believe that Whites want Blacks to get a better break. Overall, parents that were married and female were more likely to give at least one of the three types of messages versus parents that were not married and male.

Hughes and Chen (1997) investigated when and why parents transmit race socialization messages to their children. Their sample consisted of 157 dual-earner, married-couple, Black families who had at least one child between the age of 4 and 14 years. They found that parents were significantly less likely to racially socialize their younger

children than older children. In addition, they found that parents' own race socialization experiences and race-related experiences in the workplace shaped the types of messages they transmitted to their children.

Sanders Thompson (1994) considered how generation related to the type of race socialization message received. Two hundred twenty-five Blacks between the age of 18 and 85 were interviewed. Using four previously cited themes of race socialization (Bowman and Howard, 1985), Sanders Thompson found the content of race socialization messages varied systematically by age. For example, respondents between the age of 18 and 35 reported receiving higher rates of racial pride messages from their parents, whereas respondents over the age of 35 reported receiving more self-development and egalitarian messages. Sanders Thompson proposed that the relationship captured underlying cohort or period effects.

Content of Race Socialization Messages. The types of socialization messages parents give their children may vary. Consequently, researchers have begun to seriously consider the content of these messages and their impact. For example, Bowman and Howard (1985) examined the content of race socialization messages Black parents conveyed to their children. Participants consisted of 377 members of the youngest cohort in three-generation families. Parents' race socialization messages consisted of four themes: (a) racial pride, (b) self-development orientations, (c) racial barrier orientations, and (d) egalitarian views. Racial pride messages emphasized Black unity, teachings about heritage, and instilling positive feelings toward the group. Self-development messages emphasized individual excellence and positive character traits. Racial barrier messages emphasized an awareness of racial inequities and strategies for coping with these. Egalitarian messages emphasized interracial equality and coexistence.

Race Socialization as a Predictor. Demo and Hughes (1990) assessed the effects of receiving race socialization messages on Black adult racial identity. They found that adults who received race-related socialization messages from parents while growing up were more likely to have strong feelings of closeness to other Blacks and to hold stronger support for Black separatism (Stevenson, 1994). Consistent with the findings of Demo and Hughes (1990), Sanders Thompson (1994) also found that race socialization messages were associated with adult racial identity. Sanders Thompson (1994) assessed race socialization by asking Black adults a series of questions regarding the frequency of conversations with parents and other adult family members regarding race and the content of those conversations. Participants' statements were coded into four broad dimensions. Racial identity was assessed with the use of the 30-item Multidimensional Racial Identification Questionnaire (Sanders Thompson, 1994). High scores on each of the four dimensions indicated positive racial identification (i.e., physical, cultural, sociopolitical, and psychological). Race socialization

was significantly and positively related to all dimensions of racial identity, excluding cultural. In addition, those race socialization messages received by adult family members had the strongest impact on adult respondents' racial identity.

Phinney and Chavira (1995) investigated "ethnic" socialization by parents of minority group adolescents. The primary purpose of their study was to identify ethnic socialization issues that minority parents transmit, and to assess the impact of these messages on their children's ethnic identity, self-esteem, and strategies for coping with discrimination. A total of 120 participants from three different ethnic groups (i.e., Japanese-American, African American, and Mexican American), 16 of which were African American, participated in the study. Ethnic socialization was assessed by asking parents a series of questions concerning whether they ever taught or told their kids things about their ethnic group membership. Ethnic identity was assessed by administering the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney, 1992) to the adolescents. They found that African American parents reported providing the most extensive ethnic socialization. However, ethnic socialization was not significantly related to adolescent outcomes (i.e., self-esteem, racial identity, and coping with discrimination).

Bowman and Howard (1985), in addition to exploring the content of parental race socialization messages, examined how receiving differential race socialization messages impacted adolescents' motivation and academic achievement. Parents emphasized one of four messages: (a) ethnic pride, (b) self-development, (c) racial barrier awareness, or (d) egalitarianism. Youth whose parents emphasized racial barrier awareness messages received higher grades. More specifically, parents who oriented their children to opportunities in a proactive manner had children not deterred from prospects of upward mobility, irrespective of environmental challenges. Parents who used the proactive style were said to spend time talking to their children about racism before the youth experienced racial encounters. The results suggest that race socialization strategies differentially contribute to academic achievement and perceived self-efficacy.

Description of Race Socialization Measures

Because the conceptual definition of race socialization tends to vary across studies, there is little agreement regarding the best way to operationalize racial socialization. Most race socialization measures are derived from descriptive data gathered in survey interviews. For example, several studies (Bowman and Howard, 1985; Demo and Hughes, 1990; Thornton, Chatters, Taylor and Allen, 1990) have focused on the content of race socialization based upon data gathered in the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) by the Program for Research on Black Americans at the University of Michigan (see Jackson, 1991).

Race socialization was assessed by the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) with this series of yes/no and open-ended questions: "In raising your children, have you done or told them things to help them know what it is to be Black?" If they answered yes, they were asked, "What are the most important things you've done or told them?" The race socialization messages have been coded into different categories by various scholars (see Bowman and Howard, 1985; Demo and Hughes, 1990; Thornton, 1997).

Hughes and Chen (1997) assessed race socialization by asking parents whether or not they had ever engaged in a race-related socialization behavior with their child. Their 16-item scale represented three dimensions of race socialization: (a) cultural socialization, (b) preparation for bias, and (c) promotion of mistrust. If parents said they had engaged in any of the behaviors, they were then asked how often in the past year (1 = never; 5 = very often).

Phinney and Chavira (1995) examined "ethnic" socialization by parents among minority group adolescents. Ethnic socialization was assessed by use of an open-ended and closed question telephone interview. Each participant's parent was asked: 1. "Do you try to teach your son or daughter about the cultural practices of your ethnic group?" 2. "Have you tried to teach your son or daughter how to get along in mainstream American culture?" 3. "Have you talked to him or her about how to deal with experiences like name-calling or discrimination?" and 4. "Have you personally tried to prepare your son or daughter for living in a culturally diverse society?" Yes responses were followed up with probes. Six themes were found in the parental socialization interview: achievement, culture, adaptation, pride, prejudice as a problem, and coping with prejudice.

Peters (1985) observed thirty 3-year-old Black children with their parents to assess the impact of race-related discussions within the home environment. She identified several categories of race socialization messages that were conveyed during parent-child discussions. These categories included messages such as getting a good education, not expecting fair play, awareness of racism, expressing love, and having self-respect and pride.

Sanders Thompson (1994) assessed race socialization using a face-to-face interview that contained a series of questions related to socialization regarding race and race relations. Participants were first asked to indicate the frequency of discussions regarding race with their parents and other adult members of their family (i.e., no discussion, isolated or limited discussion, regular discussion, and ongoing numerous discussions). Second, participants were asked to rate the impact they felt these messages had on their beliefs and values on a five-point scale ranging from no impact to strong impact. Third, respondents were asked to discuss the messages they received

from family members. These messages were coded into categories that reflected the themes of the Bowman and Howard (1985) study.

Stevenson (1994) created the Scale of Racial Socialization (SORS-A, a 45-item measure that assesses adolescents' degree of acceptance of racial socialization messages). Stevenson purported that if adolescents were asked their opinions about parenting, they would respond in ways that were reflective of their actual experience. The SORS-A was designed to assess the adolescents' own experiences of race socialization. The 45 items were measured on a five-point Likert scale and broken into four factors: (a) Spiritual and Religious Coping (SRC), (b) Extended Family Caring (EFC), (c) Cultural Pride Reinforcement (CPR), and (d) Racism Awareness Teaching (RAT).

Directions for Future Research on Race Socialization

To date, there are no measures of race socialization that assess indirect or nonverbal messages or that distinguish between parental versus environmental origins of messages. Consequently, measures of race socialization are only capturing a portion of the messages expressed by parents and family members. In future studies, it will be important to investigate the impact of peers and other adults' (e.g., neighbors, church members, teachers) messages. In addition, there are no studies that explore the content and process of race socialization among ethnic groups in the Black race. For example, do Jamaican, Haitian, or Dominican parents transmit messages to their children about what it means to be Black in the United States? Researchers may also need to address the meaning and significance of race socialization among children and adults claiming biracial or multiracial (Black and other) ancestry.

Studies of race socialization must also begin to take age, period and cohort seriously. There is a need for longitudinal studies that examine the process of parental race socialization across generations and historical time period. For instance, the literature in this area says very little about how race socialization messages change as a function of children's age, and the impact of these messages on social outcomes and racial identity at different points in the life span. Importantly, the literature is also limited because it assumes that the race socialization process ends with parental messages transmitted during childhood and adolescence. But in fact, adults continue to receive messages about being Black from various sources.

Since race endures as a social status with tremendous importance, as a part of effective socialization, most Black parents feel obligated to inform their children about what it means to be Black. The socialization process to the meaning of Blackness, however, does not end in childhood and increasingly adults have experiences that shape how they think about race. So it is important that we develop theories and models of the race socialization process that represent its complexity and dynamic

nature.

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