White Parents’ Racial Socialization

ARE THEY DOING AS MUCH AS THEY THINK THEY ARE?

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ABSTRACT

While parents of color cite racial socialization as an important aspect of parenting, White parents often do not share these views. White parents are often reluctant to discuss race and racism with their children, even in relevant situations, either because they fear it will induce racism or they believe that race is no longer relevant. This study investigated how White parents talk to their children about race and the extent to which racial attitudes align.

We presented ten White parent-child dyads with two race-relevant news clips and asked them to watch and discuss the clips. We then separated parent and child for independent interviews during which we asked what they had discussed, if they had talked about these or other issues before, and how the subject of race may be approached in their household. Parents and children were also given appropriate racial socialization and bias measures.

The data suggests that parental perceptions of their socialization efforts differ from the messages their children are receiving. Although most parents recalled having conversations about race with their children, usually prompted through schoolwork, the children reported these conversations as lessons about bullying, rather than race. When parents addressed discrimination or racial injustice, it was in terms of historical context, failing to connect to other current race-related issues.

METHODS

METHODS (CONTINUED)

Participants (N = 10) were White-American parents with children ages 10 to 12. Parents and children were asked to watch two news clips: one of football player Colin Kaepernick in the NFL kneeling controversy and one focused on the removal of confederate statues in the South. After discussing the clips using prompts provided, parents and children were interviewed separately. Parents completed measures of racial bias (Symbolic Racism Scale; Henry & Sears, 2002) as well as a measure of racial socialization (Palhme, et al’s 2012 modification of Hughes & Chen’s 1997 Parent Racial-Ethnic Socialization Behaviors scale, measuring current racialization practices as well as anticipated future socialization practices). Children completed the Black White Evaluative Scale (BETS; Hughes & Bigler, 2007) as well as a modified Perceived Parental Ethnic Socialization Scale (van Bergen, et al., 2016). Qualitative measures asked parents and children to report how they discuss race at home, how they deal with those conversations, and how other socializing agents (school, peer groups, neighborhoods, etc.) play a role in the types/depth of conversations.

METHODS

Parent Interview

- Racial bias measure
- Racial socialization
- Qualitative interview

Child Interview

- Racial bias measure
- Racial socialization
- Qualitative interview

Debrief

- Parent and child together
- Offer literature to continue the conversation

RESULTS

Table 1: Child interview themes and responses

| Colorblind | “Cause most of us don’t really care. We don’t care what race we are. We’re all friends.” |
| Color Conscious | “Because they don’t understand how it is to be someone that is different than White, because White people are a little bit more privileged and they get a little more stuff than Black people do and Latino people do.” |
| Othering | “…I’m thinking that maybe since we have only a few Black kids in our school. I’m thinking that they might not be quite happy about it just because there’s so few of them. And they might be thinking oh no, this isn’t good. Like they think they’re being brought down because there’s just so little of them.” |
| | “Ummm well after, well on Martin Luther King Day we usually talk about how it still exists and it’s better than it was before but it still can get better. And we also talk about it after bad things happen like in Charlottesville and other events too.” |

Because we’re past that point where we really don’t see race anymore. We’re just kinda… people.

“Umm so that maybe some time in the future some Black people might be like ‘Hey I want to learn about what happened in our past and I don’t care what I learn about as long as it doesn’t scare me and I’m happy.’

Our observational data suggests that parents largely take the lead when discussing race. In our sample, we found that parents were taking, on average, 58.9% of the time, compared in their children’s 41.1%. Parental conversation domination ranged from less than half of the spoken words (44.7% in Participant 11) to almost four times as much as their child (78.0% in Participant 2).

DISCUSSION

Parental responses indicate parents have had conversations with their children about race, using conduits including sports or the current political climate with our observational data showing that parents are taking up an average of 58.9% of that conversation time. While parents are leading the conversation, child responses indicate parents may not have been as explicit as they believed they were, consistent with previous research (Underhill, 2014). Additionally, responses from the modified Perceived Parental Ethnic Socialization Scale, show that the messages children were receiving may have an othering effect on their idea of their own race. When asked if their parents had ever told them that “being White is an important part of who you are” or that they “should be proud to be White,” the most common response was ‘Never’ (averages 1.363, 1.091 respectively). Parents in this study reported that they didn’t want their child to feel ashamed to be White, yet the message that they should be proud to be White was not what children perceived. Children reported mostly colorblind racial ideas, but did report that if they had questions about race or racism, they were most likely to go to a parent, indicating these socialization messages are important and warrant further study.