

Race Centrality and Racial Socialization in African American Adolescents: Gender Differences in Identity Development

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Abstract

Changes in parental racial socialization and the importance of race to personal identity were examined in African American youth as they proceeded from elementary schools in which the majority of students were African American to middle schools with greater racial diversity. It was hypothesized that racial socialization would increase across this transition, and that increased socialization would be linked to higher racial centrality. Consistent with the study hypotheses, socialization regarding both racial pride and preparation for discrimination increased from Grade 5 to Grade 7. Increased racial socialization was related to an increase in racial centrality. Contrary to hypotheses, results did not differ for boys and girls. Results are discussed in terms of implications for identity development in African American youth.

Introduction

- As youth enter adolescence, they become increasingly aware of the significance of their membership in social groups such as those based on gender, ethnicity, and race. In their Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity, Sellers et al. (1997) described racial centrality as the importance individuals ascribe to race in their personal identity.
- The centrality of race to the identities of young African Americans is probably shaped by influential adults, particularly parents, who transmit messages to children and adolescents about race. It is likely that parents have more conversations about race as children enter adolescence and become increasingly aware of the racialized nature of American society. Some researchers have found gender differences in racial socialization, with parents of sons having more conversations about expecting and preparing for bias, and parents of daughters emphasizing racial pride (e.g., Thomas & Speight, 1999).
- In the current study, changes in reports of racial socialization and racial centrality were assessed in African American children in Grade 5 when children attended elementary school and in Grade 7 when children attended middle school.

Hypotheses

- We hypothesized that race would become more central to these African American youth as they made the transition from elementary school to middle school.
- It was anticipated that youth would report more conversations with their parents about race (both regarding racial pride and preparation for discrimination) as seventh graders than as fifth graders.
- Boys were expected to report more socialization related to preparation for bias than girls, who were expected to report more socialization related to race pride.
- Changes in racial centrality and racial socialization were expected to covary across the two years; that is, changes in reports of parental racial socialization were expected to be positively related to changes in racial centrality.

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Method

Participants

290 fifth graders (120 boys and 170 girls) from seven predominantly-Black (i.e., 72% or more children were African American) elementary schools in an urban school district. Youth participated a second time as seventh graders attending middle schools that varied in racial composition (i.e., ranging from 37% to 98% African American).

Measures

Racial Centrality

Racial Centrality was measured using 4 items from the centrality subscale of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI) (Sellers et al., 1997). This subscale includes items that measure the extent to which being African American is central to the respondents' definitions of themselves (e.g., "Being Black is an important part of my self-image."). Responses were on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Alpha reliabilities for this scale were 0.62 and 0.72 for fifth and seventh graders, respectively.

Racial Socialization

Two subscales of the Race Socialization Scale (Hughes & Chen, 1997) were used to measure the extent to which parents engaged in certain behaviors that prepared their children for racial bias (Preparation for Bias, 9 items; e.g., "Said that people might treat you badly due to race") and encouraged pride in one's racial group (Racial Pride, 8 items; e.g., "Done things to celebrate Black history."). Youth rated on a 5-point Likert scale the frequency with which their parents engaged in each behavior. Alpha reliabilities exceeded 0.80.

Results

Table 1
Racial Centrality and Racial Socialization in 5th and 7th grade

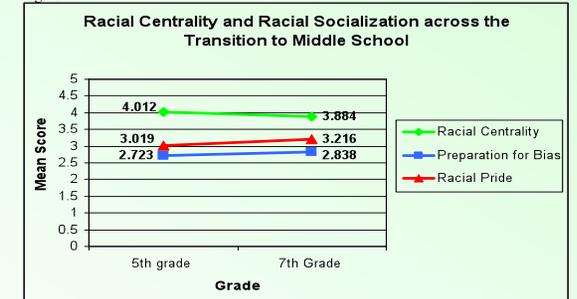
Variable	Time 1 (5 th Grade)	Time 2 (7 th Grade)
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Racial Centrality*	4.01 (.80)	3.88 (.81)
Racial Centrality: Girls	3.98 (.81)	3.93 (.85)
Racial Centrality: Boys	4.06 (.79)	3.82 (.74)
Preparation for Bias*	2.72 (.93)	2.84 (.92)
Preparation for Bias: Girls	2.79 (.95)	2.81 (.96)
Preparation for Bias: Boys	2.63 (.89)	2.88 (.86)
Racial Pride*	3.02 (.97)	3.22 (.87)
Racial Pride: Girls	3.06 (.93)	3.21 (.91)
Racial Pride: Boys	2.96 (1.02)	3.22 (.81)

*Time 1 and Time 2 differed at $p < 0.05$

Changes Across the Transition to Middle School (Figure 1)

- Youth reported lower racial centrality as seventh graders than as fifth graders.
- Both racial pride socialization and preparation for discrimination increased across the transition to middle school.
- Changes in racial centrality and racial socialization did not differ by gender.

Figure 1



Relationship between Racial Centrality and Racial Socialization

Difference scores were used to examine the relationship between changes in racial centrality and the two types of racial socialization. These analyses showed that increases in racial pride and preparation for bias socialization were both associated with increases in racial centrality, $F(1, 291) = 19.0$. Thus, the importance of race to youths' identity increased for those adolescents whose parents engaged in more racial socialization.

Discussion

- Among African American youth, the prominence of race as an aspect of identity varies across individuals. Contrary to our study hypotheses, the centrality of identity declined slightly across the transition to middle school, when youth moved from schools that were majority African American to schools that were more diverse racially. Further exploration into the existence of this decline is needed.
- As anticipated, however, youth reported that parents talked to them more about race—both about aspects of racial pride and preparation for discrimination—in seventh grade than in fifth grade. Our results did not vary by gender.
- Moreover, increases in racial socialization were related to increases in racial centrality. Our analyses did not permit conclusions about causality, but it is likely that this relationship is bidirectional: Families for whom race is more central are likely to engage in more discussions about race than families for whom race is less important; and increased conversations about race probably result in higher racial centrality among young adolescents.
- Additional research is warranted to better understand how individual, familial, and contextual factors are interwoven in shaping the racial identity development of African American youth.

References

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