

Spotlighting Black Adolescent Development in the Shadow of Racism:

A Commentary

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Abstract

The special issue brings together scholarship that expands our understanding of the adverse effects of interpersonal, online, and vicarious racial discrimination on Black adolescents' psychosocial well-being and sociocultural factors (e.g., racial socialization, positive racial identity) that mitigate these effects. It also focuses attention on ways that adolescents' behavior and characteristics shape racial socialization. Some of the critical tasks that lie ahead include elevating a developmental perspective, documenting developmental pathways, directly assessing proximal mediating processes, giving more attention to the robustness and replicability of findings, and expanding levels of analyses and outcomes to include both macro-structural indicators and indicators of physiological and neuropsychological functioning.

Spotlighting Black Adolescent Development in the Shadow of Racism: A Commentary

The past two decades have seen substantial increases in journal publications in developmental science that highlight race or focus on racial-ethnic minority youth, although the percentage of such publications relative to the total number remains strikingly low (Roberts et al. 2020). A large share of these publications address questions about Black adolescents' psychosocial development in relation to parenting and contextual factors (e.g., racial socialization, racial discrimination, neighborhood

characteristics), and how these factors intersect to influence adaptation and development.

For example, studies reported in developmental science journals have established that (a) perceptions of unfair treatment and marginalization based on race are commonplace among Black youth (e.g., Pachter et al., 2018; Seaton et al., 2008); (b) the incidence of perceived interpersonal racial discrimination increases across adolescence (Seaton et al., 2008); (c) racial socialization predicts positive racial identity, with stronger links among youth in high school than those in middle school or elementary school (Huguley et al., 2019); (d) Black adolescents' perceptions of interpersonal racial-ethnic discrimination are positively associated with mental health problems (e.g., depressive symptoms, anxiety), adjustment problems in school, risky behavior, and a host of other problematic outcomes (e.g., Benner et al., 2018; Cooper et al., 2008; Smith-Bynum et al. 2014); and (e) parental messages about cultural heritage, cultural traditions (e.g., religion, kin network), and racial pride promote positive psychosocial adjustment in Black adolescents, and protect them against the negative psychosocial effects of racial discrimination (e.g., Bynum et al., 2007; Neblett et al., 2008; Wang & Huguley, 2012; Wang et al., 2020). This remarkable accumulation of knowledge about influences on Black adolescents' adjustment and development would have been unimaginable 25 years ago. The special issue brings together several studies that expand this research literature in significant ways. I comment on a few of these studies and offer thoughts about some of the tasks ahead.

Racism, Racial Socialization, Development

Leading racism scholars are critical of the near-exclusive focus on interpersonal racism in behavioral and psychological research, asserting that centering on interpersonal racism to the exclusion of other levels of racism impedes our ability to understand the full extent to which racism influences health and development. Another concern is that it may encourage poorly conceived interventions and policies that collude in the persistence of systemic racism and its most harmful effects (e.g., Harrell, 2000; Jones, 1997; Neblett, 2019; Williams & Mohammed, 2013).

Gibson et al. (this issue) take an important step away from the skewed focus on interpersonal racism. They direct our attention to cultural racism, characterized by “beliefs in the superiority of one group over another that are ingrained in institutions, ideological beliefs, and everyday actions of people in the culture” (Neblett, 2019, p.12). Whereas the primary goal of institutional racism is to block African Americans from equal access to the opportunity structure, cultural racism (e.g., negative portrayals of African American characters in media) seeks to diminish the cultural image and integrity of African Americans (Oliver, 2001). Gibson et al. (this issue) found that the moderating effect of cultural pride messages on the link between cultural racism (e.g., observing the police treat Whites or non-Blacks with more respect and dignity than they do Blacks) and depression symptoms depended on adolescents’ racial identity. Higher private regard and more frequent cultural pride messages, together, attenuated the association between cultural racism and depressive symptoms. Gibson et al.’s focus on cultural racism is both laudable and encouraging, but future studies would be strengthened by a measure of cultural racism that does not rely on adolescents’ perceptions, inclusion of multiple informants, and use of longitudinal research methods.

Glover et al.’s (this issue) qualitative study of African American parents reaches beyond standard categories of racial socialization and zeroes in on parents’ active engagement with their adolescents about how to cope with negative racialized experiences brought to the parent’s attention (e.g., assertive defiance, active avoidance, reflective engagement). Their excavation, which also considers how the identity of the perpetrator (i.e., institutional vs. interpersonal perpetrator) shapes parents’ coping instructions, adds to a handful of qualitative and observational studies that attempt to capture the transactional nature of racial socialization (e.g., Smith-Bynum et al. 2016). It establishes a foundation for efforts to capture a more dynamic process in which adolescents’ experiences shape parents’ instructions about how to cope and respond to racial-ethnic discrimination and parents’ instructions, in turn, influence adolescents’ coping.

Research on the socialization and development of children with a Black-White biracial or mixed-race identity is sparse, but growing (e.g., Huguley et al., 2019), a trend

that should be encouraged given their increasing prevalence in the US and the race-ethnic-related complexities they may experience. Findings from these studies could offer another lens through which to examine the meaning of race-ethnicity and how racial-ethnic hierarchies manifest in the US (Miller, 2020). In addition to adding to the research literature on biracial youth, Carter and Flewellen's (this issue) study of racial-ethnic socialization (maternal reports) during the pubertal transition are an additional reminder that youth's individual characteristics and behavior can regulate parental behavior. Among mothers of Black girls, increased worry and stress about physical changes in daughters due to puberty was linked to transmission of more preparation for bias messages. Carter and Flewellen speculated, but lacked supporting evidence, that these relations were significant among mothers of Black girls, but not mothers of Black-White biracial girls, because of increased concern among the former that physical changes due to puberty would increase their daughter's risk of encountering racial discrimination. It is also noteworthy that mothers of Black girls reported more racial-ethnic socialization with their daughters than mothers of Black-White biracial girls (i.e., preparation for bias messages, cultural socialization, promotion of mistrust).

It is self-evident that parents' racial socialization does not occur in a vacuum, but within the context of a relationship. This fact is a rationale for the few studies that examine various dimensions of parenting or the quality of parent-child relations (e.g., democratic-involved parenting, frequency of parent-adolescent communication, maternal warmth) as moderators of the association between racial socialization and child outcomes (McHale et al, 2006; Smalls, 2009; Tang et al., 2016). Smith et al.'s study of the relative influence of parent-reported discrimination experiences, beliefs, and coping on subsequent profiles of parent-adolescent relationships in African American families aligns conceptually with these investigations. However, it stands out for situating racial socialization within a more complex and veridical parenting context and for assessing predictors of the profiles embedded in the parenting context.

Emotional Development and Socialization

Lozada et al. (this issue) thoughtful and compelling conceptual paper reflects the surging interest in emotion regulation and development in Black children, coming on the

heels of extensive attention to these domains in White children and children belonging to cultures outside the US (Cole & Tan, 2007). Studies of Black samples and subsamples have given attention to emotional development in relation to parents' emotion-related beliefs and attitudes, emotion expressiveness, discussion of emotion, and responses to children's emotion. However, adolescents are under-represented in these studies, with the largest share focusing on infants, preschoolers, and youth in middle childhood (Labella, 2018).

The predominant pattern of findings to date is one of mean-level similarity between Black and White parents across indicators of emotional socialization. However, there is some indication from a number of race-comparative studies that Black parents' beliefs and behaviors, compared to those of White parents, are more oriented toward suppression or control of children's negative emotions (e.g., anger, fear, sadness), notwithstanding Black parents' tendency to celebrate the value of free expressiveness in children (Labella, 2018). Scholars have hypothesized that higher levels of suppression responses among Black parents may be driven partly by apprehension about the costs to their children of displaying negative emotions and a desire to protect them from racial bias that may manifest if such emotions are expressed. This hypothesis construes parents' suppression of children's negative emotions as a marker of the preparation for bias dimension of racial socialization (Dunbar et al., 2017). Although the hypothesis that concern about racial bias underlies race differences in emotion suppression awaits direct mediational testing, there is some evidence that Black mothers' suppression of preschoolers' negative emotions is less likely to predict externalizing behaviors when mothers talk to child about the potential of experiencing racial bias (Dunbar et al., 2021).

Assembling a diverse set of research findings, Lozada et al. (this issue) make a strong case that Black parents' suppression of their adolescents' negative emotions is partly a response to racially oppressive, emotionally inhibiting school environments that run counter to Black adolescents' increasing need for emotional autonomy. Their conceptual model prompts countless related questions, among them, in what ways do Black parents' conceptions of what constitutes emotional competence in adolescence

differ with the conceptions of teachers and other influential adults in the youth's life? In what ways do they align? What are the consequences of misalignment for Black adolescents' emotional health and development? How does race interact with other personal characteristics (e.g., age, gender, skin color, social class) as determinants of how teachers and other influential adults respond to different displays of emotion? What is the adaptive significance of Black youth's displays of emotion at different ages, in different settings, and different affective contexts (e.g., benign vs. hostile)?

Intersectional Awareness of Structural Causes of Inequality

Historical structural racism in housing, lending markets, employment, and education has translated into layers of accumulated, transgenerational disadvantages reflected in race differences in poverty, income, wealth, and countless goods and services that money affords (Pager & Shepherd, 2008). Given the persistent and intricate link between race and economic inequality, it is surprising that questions about the development of intersectional awareness of racism, poverty, and economic inequality among Black youth have attracted so little attention. Intersectional awareness refers to understanding of the intersecting influences of multiple systems of power on individuals and communities (Curtin et al., 2015). Research indicates that Black youth in early adolescence are able to recognize structural forms of racism (e.g., Hope & Bañales, 2019) and that their awareness of structural racism increases with age (Hughes & Bigler, 2011; Seider et al. 2019). But is growth in awareness of structural racism among Black adolescents related to change in their structural attributions for poverty or income inequality?

A recent longitudinal investigation found that change in awareness of structural racism as Black and Latinx youth moved from mid-adolescence to late adolescence was unrelated to change in their beliefs about the causes of poverty, even though both awareness of structural racism and structural thinking about poverty (also labeled critical consciousness) increased over time (Seider et al., 2019). This asynchrony may indicate that structural thinking about inequalities is issue-dependent or domain-specific,

perhaps due to youth's social identities or the timing and level of exposure to teachings about how racial and classism manifest within systems of power (Diemer et al., 2019). In addition to studies that track awareness of multiple, intersecting forms of structural inequality across adolescence, we need investigations of how trajectories of intersectional awareness relate to person characteristics and contextual factors (e.g., school curricula, discussions of current events among families, civic engagement) and how they inform Black adolescents' expectations, choices, aspirations, and patterns of social activism.

Moving Ahead

Several excellent reviews and meta-analyses of research on some topics mentioned here have been published recently (e.g., Benner et al., 2018; Huguley et al., 2019; Labella, 2018; Neblett, 2019; Seaton et al., 2018). Obviously, they present more well-developed, nuanced critiques and recommendations for advancing our understanding of development in Black adolescents than is possible in a brief commentary. My comments are more general. A few of the broad tasks ahead include sharpening the focus on and documentation of developmental pathways, giving more attention to the robustness and replicability of findings, directly assessing proximal processes presumed to mediate links between contextual factors and adolescent outcomes, and expanding levels of analyses and outcomes to include both macro-structural indicators and indicators of physiological and neuropsychological functioning. As we take up these tasks, it is vital to recruit economically diverse samples of Black adolescents unless research questions dictate otherwise, and to recruit samples that expand our scant knowledge about the socialization and development of Black middle-class adolescents (e.g., Smetana, 2004; Smetana et al., 2003).

A staple of research on Black adolescents is examination of contextual factors (conceptualized as predictors, mediators, or moderators) in relation to issues particularly pertinent to the adolescent period (e.g., identity formation, enhanced social cognition, autonomy development), using cross-sectional analyses. In many of these studies, the focus on development is more implicit than explicit. Although the amount of longitudinal psychological research with Black adolescents has increased in recent

years, a critical task ahead for many content areas is elevating and maintaining a developmental perspective, documenting the origins of domains of psychosocial adjustment in Black adolescents, and demonstrating how relations among variables evolve over time.

This task is somewhat less daunting as more public-use longitudinal data sets have become available, although using them usually comes with significant costs (e.g., restricted set of variables, less-than-ideal measures). These data sets also can be used to estimate the robustness and replicability of basic relationships found in cross-sectional analyses if they contain measures similar enough to those used in cross-sectional analyses. As efforts to redefine best research practices in developmental science take hold, studies based on small convenience samples (especially those with cross-sectional designs) that produce results that have not been replicated or have substantial barriers to external replication efforts likely will be subject to increasing scrutiny and accorded decreasing scientific merit (Duncan et al., 2014). Going forward, I also hope to see more studies of Black adolescent development that utilize experimental and quasi-experimental methods to help sort out causal relations (See Gurin et al. 2015, for an example of a quasi-experiment that tested the effects on ethnic minority and White college students' attributions about race, social class, and gender inequality of intergroup dialogue that focused on understanding identities and inequalities within a context of power and privilege). Several of the papers in the special issue call to mind the dire need for research that tests the effectiveness of antiracist policies and programs in creating environments that are more promotive of Black adolescents' emotional and social development.

Careful measurement and analyses of proximal processes, described by Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) as the "engines of development" (p. 118), also stands to deepen our understanding of how development occurs in Black youth. Basic descriptive (e.g., Glover et al., this issue) and observational work are especially valuable for its insights about proximal, transactional processes. Although a "three-term model" linking parenting cognitions (e.g., beliefs, attitudes, values) to parenting practices and child and adolescent behavior has wide appeal, longitudinal research that

tests this general model is surprisingly rare and has been limited almost exclusively to White families (Bornstein et al., 2017). This is a vital area for improvement, given that parental socialization is a major focus in the study of Black adolescent development.

Extensions of measurement at two levels may broaden our understanding of how racism influences Black adolescents' development. First, in order to measure racism beyond the individual level, we need reliable measures of cultural and institutional racism that do not rely solely on self-reports or reports of vicarious experiences (i.e., observing other Blacks being stopped by the police or treated in a disrespectful or abusive manner, e.g., Toro et al., this issue). An important task is to assess the unique effects of these levels of racism, taking account of self-reports of interpersonal racism (Neblett, 2019). Examples of creative strategies are emerging in disciplines such as public health and sociology where macro-level analyses are common (e.g., use of the proportion of Google Internet search queries containing the "n-word" measured at the media market area as a proxy for area-level racism, Chae et al., 2018; See Hicken, et al. 2018, for examples of measures of racism across disciplines). Second, given that racism is a stressor, expanding outcome measures to include markers of physiological and neuropsychological functioning may enable a fuller understanding of the effects of racism on Black adolescent development (Neblett, 2019). Both kinds of measurement extensions call for collaborations across disciplines.

In addition to innovative research methods, transdisciplinary collaborations offer the promise of broadening and integrating theories and conceptual frameworks, and developing and assessing the effects of research-based anti-racist practices and policies. Given the pivotal role that scholars of color have played in the accumulation of research-based knowledge about Black adolescent development (Roberts et al., 2020; Syed, 2018). it is reasonable to assume that future advances in understanding Black adolescent development will depend to a considerable degree on their continued recruitment, retention, and achievement in developmental science.

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