SAGE reference

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Lifespan Human Development

Cultural Socialization

Cultural socialization, the messages parents teach their children about their own race and ethnicity, is a salient aspect of child-rearing among ethnic minority families and is important for fostering a strong sense of identity and belonging to a child's cultural group. Cultural socialization, also referred to as ethnic–racial socialization, is important because it helps children learn about what it means to be a member of a racial or ethnic minority group and learn to cope with discrimination.

In addition, social science research has linked cultural socialization practices to myriad developmental outcomes, including academic performance, ethnic and racial identity, and socioemotional adjustment. This entry reviews cultural socialization, the various factors that predict the process of cultural socialization, and how cultural socialization relates to child development. It also provides suggestions for future research.

What Is cultural socialization?

Cultural socialization refers to both the explicit and implicit parental practices that teach children about the positive aspects of their race, ethnic heritage, cultural customs, and traditions. Examples include talking about history or historical figures, reading culturally relevant books, celebrating cultural holidays, and encouraging children to use their native language. Cultural socialization also includes aspects such as preparation for bias (i.e., parents' efforts to promote both their child's awareness of and ability to cope with discrimination), promotion of mistrust (i.e., practices that emphasize the need for wariness and distrust in interracial interactions), and egalitarianism (i.e., encouragement to value individual qualities over racial group membership or avoiding any mention of race in discussions with their children).

Cultural socialization is fairly common across ethnic minority families; parents are more likely to engage in discussions of cultural socialization than any other form of ethnic–racial socialization. Through the practice of teaching children about who they are, children learn to be proud of their heritage as well as the perception others may have about them.

What Predicts Cultural Socialization?

Most commonly, research has focused on children's age and gender, parent's socioeconomic status (SES), and racial identity as the main demographic variables that predict the process of cultural socialization. Studies have demonstrated that parents' racial socialization practices change with the age of the child, and as children grow older they develop a better understanding of race as a social category. Thus, parents of young children tend to transmit egalitarian messages to their children, whereas parents of children in middle childhood or adolescence transmit more complex social messages, such as discrimination or wariness of other groups.

Related to gender differences, studies with African American samples suggest that boys are more likely to receive messages regarding racial barriers, whereas girls are more likely to receive messages regarding racial pride. However, gender differences in racial socialization practices seem not to emerge until middle adolescence. Parents with higher SES report more cultural socialization and preparation for bias than do their lower SES counterparts.

One study suggested that these associations are not straightforward, with middle-SES respondents reporting more socialization about ethnicity and race than their lower or higher

SES counterparts. Parents who identify more strongly with their ethnic group (i.e., racial identity) also value cultural socialization more and report using messages such as group pride more often than parents who identify less strongly with their ethnic group. However, parents who believe that others negatively value their group tend also to discuss discrimination with their children.

Cultural Socialization and Child Outcomes

Cultural socialization is associated with favorable outcomes, including ethnic and racial identity, academic outcomes, and socioemotional adjustment.

Ethnic and Racial Identity

Ethnic identity involves an individual's self-identification as a group member, a sense of belonging to an ethnic group, positive attitudes toward ethnic group membership, and a degree of ethnic group affiliation or involvement. Ethnic identity, especially during adolescent years, is the most commonly investigated outcome of parents' ethnic–racial socialization. During early and middle childhood, cultural socialization facilitates children's knowledge about their ethnic–racial group and their favorable in-group attitudes. The process is similar later during adolescence; parents' ethnic–racial socialization is associated with indicators of ethnic identity (attitudes and behaviors that define the significance and meaning of race and ethnicity in their lives).

For example, parental teachings about ethnic pride, cultural knowledge, and preparation for bias have been significantly associated with elementary school children's knowledge about their cultural traditions and with their reports about preference for their culture of origin behaviors. However, not all types of cultural socialization to which children are exposed are adaptive. One study with African American families showed that youths who received more cultural socialization from their parents reported feeling more stigmatized than did their counterparts who received less. This was especially true among youths who received conflicting messages.

Academic Outcomes

Cultural socialization efforts by parents have generally been linked to higher academic competence and motivation. In young children, the number of cultural items in the home has been associated with children's greater factual knowledge and better problem-solving skills. In middle childhood, more cultural socialization messages about African American heritage, history, and pride from their parents have been linked to greater academic engagement and efficacy for African American youths. Similarly, teaching adolescents about racial barriers as opposed to teaching nothing about race has been related to higher grades in school. It is believed that parents' efforts to teach their children about their ethnic culture helps children feel connected to their culture and feel better about themselves, which in turn predicts better academic outcomes.

In addition, ethnic–racial socialization can contain messages about opportunity, which in turn influence children's own perceptions of opportunity and their subsequent investment in the academic domain. For example, studies have shown that preparation for bias may lessen adolescents' vulnerability to stereotypes about their groups' intellectual capabilities, which in turn influence performance and achievement. Moreover, cultural socialization has been found

to weaken the effect of both teacher and peer discrimination on GPA.

Socioemotional Adjustment

In the domain of socioemotional outcomes, cultural socialization serves a variety of protective functions for ethnic minority youths. It predicts positive self-concept, fewer externalizing behaviors, lower fighting frequency and better anger management (especially among boys), higher self-esteem with peers, and fewer internalizing problems. For example, 3- to 6-year-old African American children whose parents socialized them to be proud of their heritage report fewer problem behaviors. For African American adolescents, racial pride has been associated with fewer reported behavior problems, and preparation for bias has been related to better socioemotional outcomes.

Developmental scientists suggest that cultural socialization may convey its effects by enabling children and youths to think more positively about themselves, build pride and a sense of belonging to a racial group, and may help youths develop strategies for coping with racism and discrimination. In these ways, cultural socialization may protect youths from the consequences of negative experiences associated with minority status such as experiences of discrimination, negative images of ethnic minorities, and inequalities in the distribution of opportunities and resources in the larger society.

In other words, socialization messages may foster positive self-perception, increase resistance to negative treatment, and help youths engage challenges and navigate diverse settings. However, a special note should be made about the potential protective properties of preparation for bias. Some studies have reported that less favorable outcomes are evident when youths develop expectations for discrimination and mistrust of other groups. Developmental scientists agree that a challenge for future studies is to determine the conditions under which preparation for bias is protective and how it helps children trust and get along with others who are not like them.

What Is Next?

Overall, the literature has focused on the process of cultural socialization during adolescence. Given that it is well established that exposure to family values and cultural socialization begins earlier in life, more research is needed to understand how cultural socialization changes, beginning in early childhood and over the lifespan. There is also a need to understand how the diversity of the United States makes it necessary for parents to begin talking to children about these issues in the first years of life.

Because most studies have focused on African Americans and Latinos, little is known about cultural socialization in other ethnic groups. Technically, cultural socialization is applicable across all ethnic–racial groups, not only ethnic minorities. All people are members of an ethnic group, defined as a group of people who share a common culture, religion, language, or nationality. Understanding how all parents transmit and talk about race and ethnicity with their children may have implications for policy and theory.

Finally, most of the research has focused on mothers' socialization efforts; we know little about fathers' cultural socialization practices as well as the implications for child development. In recent years, scholars have shown that children benefit from both parents and that fathers' contribution to their children's well-being is important and, in many cases, distinct from mothers'. This difference calls for more research that includes mothers and fathers, as well as

other caregivers who may play an important role in children's lives.

See also Academic Achievement; Ethnic Socialization; Parenting; Racial and Ethnic Identity; Social Competence

- socialization
- racial identity
- ethnic and racial identity
- children
- ethnic identity
- African American studies
- African studies

Daniela AldoneyCatherine KuhnsNatasha Cabrera
http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781506307633.n189
10.4135/9781506307633.n189

Further Readings

Caughy, M. O., O'Campo, P. J., Randolph, S. M., & Nickerson, K. (2002). The influence of racial socialization practices on the cognitive and behavioral competence of African American preschoolers. Child Development, 73(5), 1611–1625.

Hughes, D., & Chen, L. (1997). When and what parents tell children about race: An examination of race-related socialization among African American families. Applied Developmental Science, 1(4), 200–214. http://doi.org/10.1207/s1532480xads0104_4

Hughes, D., Rodriguez, J., Smith, E. P., Johnson, D. J., Stevenson, H. C., & Spicer, P. (2006). Parents' ethnic-racial socialization practices: A review of research and directions for future study. Developmental Psychology, 42(5), 747–770. http://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.42.5.747

Neblett, E. W., Rivas-Drake, D., & Umaña-Taylor, A. J. (2012). The promise of racial and ethnic protective factors in promoting ethnic minority youth development. Child Development Perspectives, 6(3), 295–303. http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-8606.2012.00239.x