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Parental Socialization in Response to Racism: Implications for Family Health

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AFRICAN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES

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AFRICAN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES

FAMILY DYNAMICS, HEALTH CARE ISSUES
AND THE ROLE OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

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PARENTAL SOCIALIZATION IN RESPONSE TO RACISM: IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY HEALTH

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INTRODUCTION

For decades, scholars have documented the impact of racism on the mental and physical health of African Americans. Typically this work has examined the health of African American adults, and far less has examined racism experiences on the health of the African American families unit. In the 21st century, racism is still pervasive in the United States. Arming children against the mental, physical, and health consequences of perceived racism, is one of the challenges that African American parents face. As such, it is important to investigate how African American parents socialize their children to cope with culturally relevant experiences, most often of which is racial discrimination. A growing body of literature identifies racism as a stressor that African Americans may react to with strategies ranging from approaching to avoiding the problem. A plethora of research underscores the health consequences associated with using approach or avoidance strategies. Little research, if any, has examined whether parents’ instructions to their children on responding to racism, reflects coping strategies that range from avoidance to approach. Further, we know little about the context surrounding a parents’ response to racism that may prompt them to encourage an avoidance or approach strategy. The current chapter seeks to address this gap by exploring the context of parents’ racial socialization in response to racism, the coping

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strategies identified in their responses, and implications of these strategies on the health of the African American family unit.

**Organization of the Chapter**

The current chapter takes the perspective that parent racial-ethnic socialization is a good reflection of parent internal responses to discrimination, and is the primary mechanism through with their children understand and practice responding to, or coping with, racial discrimination.

The primary aim of the chapter is to examine racial socialization as a cultural coping strategy, unpack the variation within African American parents' use of cultural coping, and examine links between cultural coping, traditional coping, and health consequences. With this in consideration, the strengths of the analyses in this chapter are attention to ecological factors in reported discrimination and coping responses, as well as attention to variation in cultural coping reported by African American parents.

The framework used in the current chapter, links the health of the family to the experience of, and coping with, racism (Figure 1).

More specifically, our framework explores cultural coping as a parent's response to racism that is informed by the racist experience, and the parent’s beliefs (e.g., emphasis on the importance of race, preferred strategy for coping with stress). The cultural coping strategy that parents communicate to their child is often a reflection of the strategy they most commonly use. The parent’s response (e.g., racial socialization) reflects a coping strategy that is then adopted by the child. The health consequences of racial discrimination then, are augmented or buffered by cultural coping strategies used by the family.

The chapter is divided into three overarching sections. The chapter begins with an overview of the primary manifestations of racial discrimination, a definition of racial socialization, and an overview of ways that African American parents prepare their children for racial adversity.

![Figure 1. A framework for racism, cultural coping, and health in African American families.](image-url)
The second section examines the method and results of the authors' study, which aimed to address how parent narratives on preparing their child for racial bias (cultural coping) corresponded with the more widely discussed coping strategies. The final chapter section links the study results to implications for the overall health and well-being of African American families. The importance of racial socialization and coping as training modules in prevention and intervention programming is also addressed.

**Definition of Terms**

Racism is an institutional pattern of power and social control that attempts to oppress people based on their ethnic or racial group membership (Constantine, 2006). Jones (1997) described three forms of racism: individual, institutional, and cultural. Individual racism is discriminatory practices enacted on a person due to their racial/ethnic group and seeks to deny them access to opportunities (Jones, 1997). Institutional racism is when societal, governmental, or institutional practices or policies seek to oppress or deny opportunities to racial and ethnic minorities (Jones, 1997). Lastly, cultural racism is when the dominant group asserts that their culture is superior or imposes their culture onto non-dominant groups (Jones, 1997). The current study considers the broad terms racial discrimination and racism to encompass all three realms of racism defined here.

In response to racist events, youth and adults use various strategies for coping with the stress associated with racism. One type of coping strategy that African American parents use to equip their children for handling racist events is racial-ethnic socialization. Racial-ethnic socialization refers to a mix of messages emphasizing intergroup protocol, individual, and racial group membership.

As such, racial socialization is considered within this chapter to be a culturally relevant coping strategy. Culturally relevant coping strategies include coping strategies that are relevant to the experiences of African Americans, specifically racial discrimination, and communicate specific ways that children should react to discrimination. These responses may range from instructing the child to take action, to encouraging the child to ignore the experience. Parents' coping responses to racial discrimination, in the current study, encompassed many different realms; consequently, we refer to racism and racial discrimination broadly and interchangeably in examining its links with health.

**Racial Discrimination and Health Outcomes in African American Youth and Adults**

Virtually all of the research that has been conducted on the association between the experience of discrimination and mental health has found an inverse relationship between racial discrimination and mental health (Williams, Costa, and Leavell, 2010). For example, findings show that both lifetime major discrimination and day-to-day discrimination contribute to major depression and psychological distress among African American adults (Kessler, Mickelson, and Williams, 1999; Landrine and Klonoff, 1996; Williams, Neighbors, and Jackson, 2003) and among African American youth (Brody, Chen, Murry, Ge, Simons,
Gibbons, Gerrard, and Cutrona, 2006; Gaylord-Harden and Cunningham, 2009; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, and Lewis, 2006; Wong, Eccles, and Sameroff, 2003). Furthermore, discrimination can negatively impact mental health outcomes long after the initial incidents by increasing the likelihood of risk taking behaviors and adversely impacting one’s adherence to and initiation of healthy behaviors (Williams, Costa, and Leavell, 2010).

Racism and its Links to Family Health: Theoretical Considerations

Our knowledge of the cultural preparations for coping is essential to preventing negative health consequences to the ongoing racism that African American families must endure. Several theoretical frameworks are useful when studying and analyzing the impact of racism on African American families: Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory (1977), Garcia Coll and colleagues’ (1996) integrative model for the study of child development in minority children, and the stress proliferation framework as utilized by Brody and colleagues (2008). Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory suggests that the individual child and the systems that surround them (e.g., their family, social environment, and institutions that impact them through their family members) must be examined to develop a comprehensive picture of potential mechanisms through which racial discrimination can impact their well-being (Sanders-Phillips, Settles-Reaves, Walker, and Brownlow, 2009). By virtue of the fact that racial discrimination is pervasive and can occur at multiple levels (e.g., individual, institutional, societal, and vicariously through parents and caregivers), it stands to reason that studying racism’s impact would be important for understanding health outcomes for African American children (Sanders-Phillips et al., 2009). For example, parental experiences of racism may impact their child through the messages that they provide them about race and racism and their parenting practices (e.g., Berkel et al., 2009). Additionally, research has shown that parents’ racial identity beliefs often predict the content of the racial messages they send their children (Scottham and Smalls, 2009).

Furthermore, Garcia Coll and colleagues (1996) assert that given the historical and current devaluing of and oppression experienced by ethnic and racial minorities in the United States, the ways in which these families cope with racism and discrimination within the family context is important for children’s positive development.

Lastly, using a stress proliferation framework (Pearlin, 1989), Brody and colleagues (2008) postulated that perceived racial discrimination among African American rural mothers would lead to negative health outcomes and then compromised parenting practices. Indeed, Brody and colleagues (2008) found that racial discrimination induced stress-related health problems in African American rural mothers, which then led to increases in depressive symptoms.

Additionally, depressive symptoms were associated with subsequent declines in parental involvement and support of their child, parental monitoring, and parental warmth and increases in arguments with their child (Brody, Chen, Kogan, Murry, Logan, and Luo, 2008). These findings suggest that racism can have a negative impact on the entire family unit. Specifically, racism directly impacts the health of the caregivers (i.e., mothers) and indirectly impacts their children, through its consequences on parenting practices.
COPING WITH RACISM IN AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES

Coping has been found to be a promising buffer of the deleterious health consequences of racism on the family unit. Coping is defined as the thoughts and behaviors that a person uses to deal with stressful (distressing) situations (Folkman and Lazarus, 1991). African American adults and youth use various coping strategies in response to racial discrimination. The two that are most commonly discussed are approach (or problem-focused) coping and avoidant coping (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, and Wadsworth, 2001; Power, 2004; Scott, 2003). Approach coping includes problem-solving, taking direct action, or attempting to change the stressor (Causey and Dubow, 1992; Roth and Cohen, 1986; Scott, 2003). Avoidant coping is characterized by efforts (mental or behavioral) to deny, ignore, or minimize a stressful situation (Causey and Dubow, 1992; Roth and Cohen, 1986; Scott, 2003). In general, approach coping has been found to be positively associated with higher self-esteem among African American adults when used to combat perceived racial discrimination (Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, and Cancelli, 2000). In contrast, avoidant coping strategies have been found to be associated with lower life satisfaction, self-esteem and hope, and higher psychological distress for African American adults who used these strategies to deal with racial discrimination (Barnes and Lightsey, 2005; Danoff-Burg, Prelow, and Swenson, 2004; Utsey, et al., 2000). Although the research on avoidant coping suggests that it is linked with poor health outcomes for adults, the literature on approach and avoidant coping on African American youth’s health outcomes is sparse. Among this population, Gaylord-Harden and Cunningham (2009) found that use of avoidant coping strategies was predictive of higher anxiety scores and use of active coping (a form of approach coping) was predictive of lower anxiety scores. Additional research is needed to better understand how coping is communicated and transmitted from adults to children in African American families.

Contextual Nature of Coping with Racism in African American Families

Coping with racism occurs within a broader family context. One of the most influential factors related to children’s coping processes is their family (Compas, Worsham, and Ey, 1992). According to Power (2004), parents may influence the coping strategies that their children use through the emotional climate in the home, how they respond to their children’s emotionality, and by aiding their children with problem solving and making meaning of difficult and stressful situations. The importance of parents and caregivers in socializing their children in how to cope with racial discrimination has been extensively documented (e.g., Hughes, Rodriguez, Smith, Johnson, Stevenson and Spicer, 2006; Sanders-Phillips et al., 2009; Utsey, Giesbrecht, Hook, and Stanard, 2008). Additionally, successfully coping with racial discrimination is considered to be an important developmental task for children of color (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Sanders-Phillips et al., 2009).

One method through which families of color equip their children and adolescents to cope is racial socialization (Hughes and Chen, 1999; Hughes et al., 2006; Sanders-Phillips et al., 2009; Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, and Allen, 1990). Racial socialization is described as the race-related messages that parents pass on to their children (Hughes and Johnson, 2001; Johnson, 2001). Lesane-Brown (2006) defined it as the “specific verbal and non-verbal
messages transmitted to younger generations for the development of values, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs regarding the meaning and significance of race and racial stratification, intergroup and intragroup interactions, and personal and group identity” (Lesane-Brown, 2006, pg. 403). African American youth who receive race-based messages from family about how to cope with racial discrimination have been found to experience less distress due to personal and institutional discrimination (Harris-Britt, Valerie, Kurtz-Costes, and Rowley, 2007; Neblett, White, Ford, Philip, Nguyen, and Sellers, 2008; Sanders-Phillips et al., 2009; Scott, 2003). We have coined racial socialization messages a culturally specific coping strategy throughout the chapter.

**Cultural Coping with Racism**

Although research suggests that racism negatively impacts African American families at multiple levels, it is encouraging that many adults and their children show resilience to the racial stigma that they experience over their lifetime. In an effort to guard children against the negative effects of racial discrimination, African American parents may provide culturally relevant coping messages to their children. These culturally relevant coping messages may take the form of racial socialization messages and can include within them approach or avoidant responses to how to deal with racist experiences. More specifically, racial socialization messages may emphasize problem solving or action (i.e., approach strategies) or avoidance strategies (e.g., ignoring) and are given in response to a culturally relevant experience (i.e., racism). As such, they can be considered a culturally relevant coping strategy. In the current chapter, we explore African American parent’s socialization in response to, or in preparation for, racial discrimination. Research has shown that for African American youth, use of culture-specific coping strategies is predicted by racial discrimination and that youth may prefer to use culture-specific coping strategies as opposed to mainstream strategies (Gaylord-Harden and Cunningham, 2009). While racial socialization is not explicitly mentioned as a culturally relevant coping strategy, it can be seen as a culturally specific parenting practice that has implications for coping with racism because it prepares children to interpret and cope with racism (Hughes,. Bachman, Rubele, and Fuligni, 2005). Specifically, racial socialization messages have been shown to influence children’s coping strategies in response to racism (Johnson, 2001). We refer to this socialization as a reflection of culturally relevant coping. A burgeoning body of research has contributed to our understanding of the importance of parent racial socialization on the child’s racial identity, academic achievement and motivation, and on its effectiveness as a buffer of adolescent experiences with racial discrimination (Neblett, Philip, Cogburn, and Sellers, 2006; Hughes et al., 2006; Smalls, 2009). Bowman and Howard (1985) found that 62% of African American parents transmitted various types of racial socialization messages to their children and the remaining 38% passed no such messages to their children. There are several race-related values and messages parents may inculcate in their child, and the authors direct readers to a review of racial socialization messages for more detail (Hughes et al., 2006).

Racial socialization has implications for various aspects of African American children and adolescents’ well-being. Scholars have found that parental racial socialization buffers the negative impact of perceived racial discrimination on depression, health behaviors, and
academic achievement for African American children and adolescents (e.g., Berkel et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2006; Neblett, Chavous, Nguyen, and Sellers, 2009). Additionally, ethnic/racial identity among African American youth has been found to buffer the impact of racial discrimination on school bonding (e.g., Dotterer, McHale, and Crouter, 2009), academic outcomes (e.g., Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, and Cogburn, 2008), and psychological functioning (e.g., Sellers et al., 2006). Harris-Britt and colleagues (2007) found that racial socialization that prepares for racial bias mitigates links between perceived racial discrimination and African American adolescents’ self-esteem (Harris-Britt, Valrie, Kurtz-Costes, and Rowley, 2007). Additionally, frequent racial socialization was related to an increased use of seeking social support and more use of problem-solving strategies in response to racism among African American adolescents (Scott, 2003). As such, racial socialization messages appear to have coping implications when children and adolescents experience racism. Additionally, racial socialization messages may encourage the use of approach coping strategies; however, the relationship between racial socialization messages and promotion of avoidant coping strategies is unclear. Given the gaps in the literature, this study proposes that African American parents will provide racial socialization messages to their children in response to racism. Additionally, these racial socialization messages will promote either approach or avoidant coping strategies that their children can use when confronted with future racist experiences. As such, racial socialization may promote the use of active coping strategies (e.g., seeking social support and use of problem-solving strategies) or encourage the use of more passive strategies in response to racist events. Given the past research, the purpose of this study is to examine variation in cultural coping messages (i.e., racial socialization messages) in response to racism. Considering the emphasis on actively preparing youth for racism, we expect parents to promote active strategies more often than passive. This area of research is new, however, as such, we make no specific a priori hypotheses.

THE BLACK FAMILIES SPEAK STUDY

One of the main goals of the study was to understand parents’ messages to children that included culturally relevant coping strategies for how to deal with racial discrimination. Focus groups were conducted in an effort to qualitatively explore this parenting practice. As focus groups are more unstructured than other qualitative methodologies, they allow for the discussion to be shaped by the participants (Hughes and Dumont, 1993; Zeller, 1993). Additionally, this methodology allows a space for deeper exploration of the context surrounding preparation for bias messages that parents give their children.

Participants

Ten focus groups were conducted which included 73 participants who represented 62 families. Ninety-eight percent of participants identified as Black/African American. Roughly seventy-seven percent of the sample was female and 23.3% identified as male (n=17). Over half of the sample was married (55.6%) while 44.4% of the sample was single (e.g., divorced,
cohabitating, widowed or never married). Fifty-two percent of parents reported college as their highest level of education (e.g., Associates degree, some college or Bachelor’s degree), followed by 31.5% who reported graduate level work (e.g., some graduate school, Masters, or Ph.D.) and 15% of parents reported high school (e.g., some high school or received high school diploma). Almost half of the sample reported being employed full-time (47.9%) while 15.1% reported being employed part-time and the remainder 35.6% reported other (e.g., self-employed or unemployed). The age range of the parents spanned from 23 years old to 59 years old ($M=37.6, SD=8.4$) and the mean number of children in the house was 2 children per family.

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited through four community organizations located in several counties in a state in the Southeast. Participants were invited to participate in a discussion on the nature of conversations they have with their children with regard to race, and what they were doing to raise successful children of color. Focus groups were held for 90 minutes in a central location in participants’ respective communities. Participants were first given registration packets with consent forms, and demographic questions. Focus groups were audio and video recorded. Upon completing the registration packet, the principal investigator facilitated each focus group with a series of questions designed to prompt discussion about the conversations parents have with their children about race.

**Data Analysis**

Focus groups were audio and video recorded. Transcripts of audio files were used to analyze participant’s responses verbatim. Prior to data analysis, transcripts were checked to assure their quality by 2 research assistants. A modified grounded theory approach was used including deductive and inductive coding (Perry and Jensen, 2001). Traditional grounded theory includes developing theory that is grounded in the data such that data analysis builds on theories being developed specifically from the data and not from existing literature (Perry and Jensen, 2001; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Modified grounded theory allows previous theories to be included in the data analytic process while still being open to new dimensions emerging from the data (Perry and Jensen, 2001). Using this approach then requires the use of deductive codes that are informed from previous theory and literature in addition to inductive coding to allow for new previously unconsidered codes to emerge directly from the data. A major advantage of using a modified grounded theory approach is that it “combines links to existing theories with specific guiding principles of data analysis from grounded theory” e.g., inductive coding (Perry and Jensen, 2001, pg.4).

In the current study a research team comprised of the principal investigator, 3 graduate research assistants and 1 undergraduate research assistant separately read and coded 10 focus group transcripts. Each member of the research team was familiar with the racial socialization and coping literature. Transcripts were each coded by two separate members of the research team. Analyses began by identifying sections of the transcript that included a message a parent gave their child about how to cope with racism.
Deductive Coding

After a section of the transcript was identified as a racial socialization message, deductive coding was used to analyze parents' racial socialization messages that aligned with two of the most common coping styles from the health literature—approach coping (i.e., changing a behavior or attitude as a result of the racism experience) and avoidant coping (i.e., ignoring the racism experience altogether) (Compas et al., 2001; Power, 2004; Scott, 2003). Examples of participant responses that aligned with each of these coping strategies will be provided and discussed in the results section.

Inductive Coding

Following this analysis, inductive coding was then used to analyze within group variation of the types of messages parents give their children about how to cope with racism. This inductive approach was used to allow for new previously unconsidered codes to emerge directly from participants' own words and lived experiences. Using this approach, two new codes emerged within the approach coping code—approach coping with instruction and approach coping without instruction. These two codes emerged directly from the data during the inductive coding analysis. Further discussion and examples of participants' responses that aligned with these codes will be discussed in the next section.

Inter-rater Reliability

Each transcript was coded twice by at least two research assistants. Inter-coder agreement was assessed using percent agreement in order to determine the percentage of agreement wherein coders coded the same data as reflecting the same theme (Lombard et al., 2002). In the current study percent agreement was 1.00, which is high given that .70 is often an indicator of high percent agreement in exploratory research (Lombard et al., 2002).

Results

The purpose of the current study was to examine the variation of parental/caregiver racial socialization in response to racism. Results from coding analyses of the focus groups transcripts revealed that participants' statements regarding responses to racism did align with avoidant and approach coping strategies. Thirty-eight parent responses were coded during our analyses.

The results revealed that avoidant coping responses made up 26.3% of responses while approach coping made up 73.7% of the coded responses. The following sections will provide examples and unpack participant reports of messages they give their children about responding to racism. We then examine parent responses as reflections of avoidant and
approach coping. Pseudonyms are used in place of real names to maintain the anonymity of participants.

**Culturally Relevant Coping as Reflecting Avoidant Strategies**

Avoidant coping includes an individual responding to stressful situations without attempting to modify it in order to reduce their psychological discomfort, usually by simply ignoring the problem (Lewis, Byrd, and Ollendick, 2012). Within parents’ discussions of cultural strategies used to cope with racism, themes that aligned with avoidant coping fell into two categories: (a) parents telling their children to ignore racial discrimination or (b) parents ignoring and remaining silent about race in response to their children’s experience with discrimination. Maria, a 51 year-old African American mother explains how she responded to being called a racial slur in front of her 14 year-old son.

Maria:

And of course the man put his finger up at me and he yelled, you know, nigger, and kept right on going. I lost it and started following him. And I said, "Okay, let me get him some of the same treatment." And then I saw my son's face in the back and I said "oh my god", so I calmed myself. I told to him [my son] and say, "You're not supposed to respond to this, this is ignorant let it go. Drive on off." But yeah I said a few things, and I lost it. I've never experienced anything like that until that night.

This example shows how the parent's response includes avoidant coping strategies such that she tells her son to ignore the racist name-calling. It is consistent with another theme that emerged in the focus groups in which parents discuss being called racial slurs. This theme emerged within the avoidant coping response 30% of the time. Another example of avoidant coping comes from a parent in focus group 5. Sarah, a 31 year-old African American mother, recounts to the group her 10 year-old daughter coming home and telling her about how some of the children were talking about the fact that the teachers and parents were upset about Obama winning the election.

Sarah:

I just told her that, "There's just people out there that don't like people because they're Black." I told her the truth. I said, "They don't like people because they're Black." That's - I just. Couldn't sugarcoat it for her. Yes, I just told her, "They don't like the fact that he won because he is Black."

Interviewer: Did she respond to that?
Sarah:

And then we just went into "why?". I said, "Because I don't know why people don't like Black people." And I said, "It's not just White people that don't like Black people." I was like, "there are some Black people that don't like White people." I was like, "there are some Spanish that don't like..." I just got into everybody. I just didn't focus on what
is Black and White. I said, “All different races don’t like each other, but that’s just a part of life, that’s the way we’re living. And you just have to ignore it when you see it.” That’s what I told her, “You just have to ignore it.”

This example also has avoidant coping strategies such that the parent warned the child that within every race there are some people that do not like others because of their racial group. Sarah makes her daughter aware of the fact that different races do not get along with each other and explicitly tells their child to ignore those situations when they occur. This example further illustrates the following two additional themes that emerged from all avoidant responses: (a) most of the avoidant coping was promoted with daughters and (b) most of the discussions where avoidant coping was encouraged, were initiated by the child. These themes were represented in approximately two-thirds of the avoidant coping responses.

The following is another example of avoidant coping from focus group 3, where Monica, a 33 year-old African American mother, ignores the prompt to discuss racism in the home with her 7 year-old daughter.

Monica

We was watching the show the other night and they show back in like the -- where was it, like the ‘60s when the police was beating everyone and she was like, “Mom, why are they doing that?” And I’m going to be honest, I couldn’t give her a answer because I didn’t know which way to give her the answer. I didn’t want to say it in wrong way and I didn’t want to say it the right way. So her father was like, “Well, Erica that’s what they did back in the days.” And she was like, “Do they do that now? He was like, “Well, no.” He was like, “No they don’t do it now,” he said, “Well that was part of our heritage, that’s what we had to go through.” And she was like, “Well why we had to go through all this?” So I walked out that room because as long as he kept answering the questions she is going to keep asking and I didn’t have to answer for it.

This example contains an avoidant coping strategy because the parent not only refuses to answer the question; she let her spouse answer the questions and proceeded to leave the room. It is yet another example of the emerging themes of messages including avoidant coping primarily being given to girls and the exchanges being initiated by the child. This narrative is also indicative of the final theme that emerged in the avoidant coping data in which parents experience apprehension toward speaking on the topic or do not know what to say. Her unwillingness to discuss the topic may reflect her apprehension to send a race-related message, for example, “I didn’t want to say it in wrong way and I didn’t want to say it the right way.” Or it may reflect a lack preparation of how to respond to child-initiated questions about racism rather than her wanting to just disregard the topic, for example, “I didn’t know which way to give her the answer.” Her response also reveals that mothers and fathers may have different comfort levels with child conversations on racism, and may reveal differences in the priorities between African American parents in the way they want to socialize their children.
CULTURALLY RELEVANT COPING AS REFLECTING APPROACH STRATEGIES

Approach coping involves changing thoughts or behaviors in response to the stressor (Causey and Dubow, 1992; Roth and Cohen, 1986; Scott, 2003). In the current study messages that included approach coping always involved promoting awareness of the racism or racial discrimination that was occurring. Within our sample we found that approach coping messages often appeared in two ways: messages without instructions and messages with instructions. Approach coping messages with instructions included making the child aware of racism in addition to giving them instructions for how to cope. Approach coping messages without instruction, included messages that focused solely on helping the child to understand racism as the cause of a past or prospective experience. Below are examples from the focus group data where parents provided cultural coping socialization either with no instructions for how to cope or with instructions.

Culturally Relevant Approach Coping with No Instruction

As mentioned previously, one type of culturally relevant approach coping message parents reported giving their children included how to be aware of racism without instructions for how to cope. One such example comes from Bryant, a 47 year-old African American father from focus group 7; this message was given to his 11 year-old son about why people give respect to certain people and not others.

Bryant:

We discussed it. When it comes to President Obama, I flipped in because my son and I have about 15 minutes of quality time in the morning where we're watch movies and go over certain things. And we flipped over I think it was ABC and he said, "Mr. Obama," and then he said, "Congressman McCain and Senator McCain" in this way he was addressing everybody by their title. And he reacts, "why they don’t call him President Obama?" I said because he’s black. I said they’re not going to give — these people don’t really like it, so they’re not going to give them that respect.

In Bryant’s response to his son’s question about why President Obama was not addressed with his formal title by an ABC news correspondent, he is promoting his son’s awareness of racial discrimination. This narrative illustrates an example of approach coping without instruction because Bryant has alerted his son to racial discrimination without giving him specific strategies to cope with it. Additionally, this narrative represents a theme that emerged from this type of culturally relevant coping response where the child’s exposure to President Obama being discriminated against sparked a conversation about the child needing to be aware of what racism looks like. This theme emerged in approximately one-fourth of the approach coping without instruction responses.

Yet another example of this kind of approach coping message can be found with June, a mother from focus group 6. June, a 41 year-old mother, shared how she prepared her elementary aged sons for being aware of racism such that when something happens and they
are with friends of ill repute they need to be mindful that others may try to blame them because of their racial group membership.

June:

We all slip sometimes and get comfortable. But umm So there are some ways that sometimes I think that we do those things without necessarily saying, “You don’t want to be judged because you’re black,” but [by] correcting our kids. Then sometimes, we do frankly say to our boys, “Listen, if something goes down and you’re around troublemakers, they’re going to look at you likely first, just know that.”

In this example, June is sharing how she teaches her sons that if “something goes down” then others are going to look to them first as being the culprit. Even though she illustrates the importance of being aware of racial discrimination and racism, she does not follow up that message with instructions for how to deal with the fact that they might be wrongly accused for nefarious actions because they are Black. Therefore, June’s message is an example of an approach coping message without the parent giving their child any instructions. Furthermore, June’s narrative provides an example of the most prevalent theme that emerged from the approach coping without instruction response where the child’s interactions with other racial groups – either in school, in the workplace or with authorities – was the impetus for a conversation about what racial discrimination was and how they needed to be attune to the context of a potential racism experience. This particular theme was represented in approximately three-fourths of the narratives on approach coping without instruction.

Culturally Relevant Approach Coping with Instruction

Jessica, a 51 year-old mother from focus group 5, shared her experience of promoting awareness of racial discrimination at school and provided instructions for her high school aged son to follow if he ever experienced school-based discrimination.

Jessica:

So yesterday, because of his F’s and he’s not bringing it to my attention, I told him—I said, “We have two things here, communication which is a key. If you felt somehow that your teachers, because —” you know I mean the honor students “were rushing you with your test, you should have come to me. I would address it.” But they didn’t want to do that because in the last incident, I had to go down to the school and confront one of the teachers about responding to my messages and my emails. So I brought to his attention, “As a Black child, you have to do better. You have to get A’s and B’s. It is important that you get that because no one’s going to give you a free share. You’re going to have to work extremely hard for it. When you go off to high school, you’re going to be with the children who are not on honor roll. You’re going to be put with a group of children who probably are struggling with C’s and D’s, which is something you’re not used to. And you’re going to have to fight and work your way up.” So, my conversation with him went on for hours and hours.
This is one example of how a mother can promote awareness of the fact that discrimination will occur (or is occurring) and give her child instructions on how to handle it. In this example, Jessica tells her son that in order to cope with discrimination in school (e.g., being rushed during an exam or being placed in classes with students below his academic ability) he needs to seek social support by communicating with her so that she can address the situation. She then goes on to further suggest that he work harder because “as a Black child, you have to do better.”

Jessica’s narrative is a reflection of a cultural message that encourages her son to be aware of racial stigma and prepares him to respond using approach strategies (e.g., talking to her, striving for high grades). Moreover, Jessica’s narrative represents a theme that emerged from this type of cultural coping response where children – specifically sons – were given messages about how to cope with racial discrimination at school by working twice as hard as their White peers. This theme emerged most often as it represented 69% of the narratives that fell under this type of culturally relevant coping response.

The notion that in the school setting the child must be prepared for and have directions for how to cope with discrimination is one that was also illustrated by Tiffany, a 45 year old mother from focus group 9. She felt that both of her high school aged sons needed to be aware of ways that racism could manifest in school and specific ways in which they could cope with or possibly even prevent it.

Tiffany:

And that’s similar to what we’ve talked to particularly for both of the boys, they’ve always been an A, B students and when they try to move over where they seem as though they’re slacking off. We’ve told him that I don’t care if you get the same A that you’re White counterpart got. You’re going to always have to prove that you didn’t look on his paper and get it. So I need for you to make the choices that are best for you. Meaning you have to study a little hard, you have to study a little longer so that nobody will question how you got that A and not make it so important that people accept you because of the oldest one, he has to be liked by everyone, and that has been like a pet peeve with me.

In this example, Tiffany is telling her sons that they always have to prove they did not cheat off a White peer if they receive a good grade. She then continues her message by providing them with specific actions they can take (e.g., studying harder, making good choices, etc.) to either eliminate the accusation altogether or to address it if it does happen. Tiffany’s experience further reinforces this theme of needing to prepare Black young men around high school age to have to work twice as hard in school to succeed.

Another example of approach coping with instructions can be found in the message of a father from focus group 6. Michael, a 45 year-old father of three, tells his sons that no matter how big or small the discrimination may be, they have to always be aware and know how to deal with the world in order to combat it.

Michael:

Sometimes it could be something minor, sometimes it could be real, but I think I’m just constantly reminding them. I said, “Don’t get too comfortable,” and this is just my beliefs. People aren’t your real friends because when the chips fall down, they know that I’m going to their side and you’re going to be amazed at how it pans out. That’s been my
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experience, that’s what I believe and that’s what I tell my children. But I tell them they have to learn how to deal in the world, so you know, they have to speak black, speak white, speak Ebonics.

Here Michael is telling his children to always be aware of the racism that is going on by “not getting too comfortable” while telling them one way they can do this is to make sure they know how to use language in an effective manner based on the group they speaking with. Not only does Michael make it known that awareness of the racism is important, he also provides specific directions for how to deal with that discrimination. Michael’s message reflects another theme that emerged from this type of cultural coping where the racial composition of the child’s peer group encouraged parents to talk with their children. Specifically, parents usually spoke about choosing friends wisely and remembering that because they are Black, even though they are traveling in racially diverse groups, others will treat them differently. This theme emerged from 31% of narratives that included this type of cultural coping strategy.

Summary of Results

In summary, two types of avoidant coping responses were found: the parent ignoring or remaining silent and the parent telling the child to ignore the situation. Four salient themes that emerged within this category were as follows: (a) parents mostly promoting this coping strategy when talking with their daughters, (b) it was usually a child initiated conversation prompted by a question, something witnessed from the media, or their experience, (c) the parent or child being called a racial slur, and (d) parents showing apprehension about speaking on the topic or not knowing what to say. The first two were raised most often, in approximately two-thirds of responses. The latter two themes were discussed in about one-third of responses.

Several of the narratives contained multiple emergent themes. For culturally relevant approach coping, inductive analyses revealed two types of approach coping responses: with instruction and without instruction. Two salient themes that emerged from narratives that included approach coping without instruction category were: (a) children noticed President Obama being disrespected (representing about 26% of culturally relevant approach-no instruction narratives) or (b) when children interacted with others outside of their racial group who were in positions of power (73% of culturally relevant approach-no instruction narratives).

Additionally, for culturally relevant approach coping with instruction, two themes that emerged from narratives included: (a) choosing friends wisely (31% of instruction narratives) and (b) working twice as hard in school (exclusively given to boys) and working twice as hard in work settings (69% of instruction narratives). Overall, the results provide additional insight into the situations that parents believed warranted culturally relevant responses and the variation in coping strategies reflected in their responses.
Overall research suggests that racial socialization is a culturally specific form of coping that can arise in the presence of, or in preparation for discrimination. Though parents can provide a variety of messages in racially socializing their child (Hughes and Chen, 1999; Hughes et al., 2006; Scott, 2003; Scottham and Smalls, 2009), we were primarily interested in messages that explicitly prepare the child for racial discrimination or react to the child’s discrimination experience.

The primary aim of this chapter was to better understand how cultural coping aligns with strategies that range from avoidance natured to approach focused. A second aim was to place those findings in the context of existing links between coping responses and health outcomes in African American families.

Parents Socialization as a Reflection of Avoidant Coping

The results of the current study revealed that there is wide variation within cultural coping responses to racism. For example, African American parents’ socialization in response to their child’s racial discrimination sometimes reflected an avoidance coping approach. Generally, narratives in which parents provided an avoidance related strategy were in response to a situation or question that the child initiated. With this in mind, it is plausible that avoidance related messages reflect some apprehension about how to respond when their child asks about racism. In addition, these messages appeared to be consistently directed to African American daughters. It is unclear why cultural messages that encouraged avoidance strategies were consistently provided to daughters. Future research may examine if these results replicate using other methodologies. It is plausible that African American daughters are more likely to initiate more race-related discussions with parents and may “catch parents off guard.” These are viable questions to examine in future studies that incorporate quantitative methods.

Generally, the literature has suggested less advantageous links between ignoring the racial stressor and later health outcomes. More specifically, avoidant coping strategies have been associated with lower life satisfaction (Barnes and Lightsey, 2005; Utsey et al., 2000), lower self-esteem (Utsey et al., 2000), and increased stress (Barnes and Lightsey, 2005) among African American adults. This has important implications for the health of all family members. Among Black women, avoidant coping strategies appeared to exacerbate the impact of perceived racial discrimination on depressive symptoms (West, Donovan, and Roemer, 2010). Among Black youth, avoidant coping strategies were related to lower self-efficacy and higher distress (Moes, 2002).

It is important to note that cultural messages that reflected an avoidance strategy were discussed in the same focus groups where parents’ messages reflected approach strategies. In other words, there were no groups that discussed avoidance in isolation of approach strategies. This is encouraging as it means that parents cultural messages that reflect avoidance might also provide cultural messages that reflect approach strategies. Additional research is needed to examine the synergy of coping strategies that parents may suggest. Additional research is also needed to examine if parents cultural messages and related coping
strategies vary with the nature of the discrimination that the child experiences or context surrounding the parent-child conversation.

Parents Socialization As a Reflection of Approach Coping

In the current study, approach coping was identified in nearly seventy-five percent of the sample. Our use of a qualitative method allowed for the exploration of discoveries not yet uncovered in cultural coping research. A significant discovery from this qualitative study was that cultural coping reflected approach strategies where parents provided instructions, or provided approach strategies without instructions.

The cultural coping with no instruction theme across narratives included parents that emphasized accepting the realities of racism with their children. Messages were aimed at socializing children to understand the existence (and in some ways the permanence of racism). Within this theme, parents often talked about preparing their African American sons to be aware of racial profiling in various circumstances. In contrast, cultural coping with instruction narratives seemed to emphasize actively working against racial stereotypes (e.g., study hard so no one accuses you of cheating) and by persisting in the face of racism (e.g., study a little longer, disregard the importance of being accepted, “fight your way up”). Most characteristic of cultural coping messages with instruction was the emphasis on personal preparation and skill building. Examples of skill building in the narratives reported included being able to navigate their social world by “speaking Black, speaking White,” communicating with parents about the discrimination so that they can provide support, and allowing mom to respond to an authority figure that is perpetrating the discrimination. Similar to the theme in approach strategies with no instructions, the cultural messages that reflected approach strategies with instruction were typically provided to African American sons. Racial discrimination has been associated with diminished academic motivation for African American youth across the developmental spectrum (Chavous et al., 2008; Smalls, White, Chavous, & Sellers, 2007). Parents’ awareness of these consequences may foster their emphases on skill building and awareness of racism (Cooper and Smalls, 2010; Neblett et al., 2006).

HEALTH IMPLICATIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS
RESPONSES TO RACISM

Overall, the study results revealed that parents’ messages reflected approach coping strategies in response to experiences with racial discrimination. Approach (or problem-solving) strategies have been found to be predictive of lower perceived stress and higher life satisfaction among African American adults (e.g., Barnes and Lightsey, 2005). Some research suggests that approach coping strategies buffer the impact of racial discrimination on deleterious health and mental health consequences by reducing the likelihood that one will justify the discriminatory experience and/or internalize negative feelings about the self (Pascoe and Smart Richman, 2009). A similar rationale is provided for the buffering role of parent’s cultural coping socialization that encourages an awareness of racial stigma.
Specifically, Hughes and colleagues (2006) suggested that barrier socialization might potentially result in decreased school engagement if these messages are not coupled with positive affirmations about their racial/ethnic group. A positive evaluation of one’s racial group may protect African American families from distressing over preparation for racism (Hughes et al. 2006; Smalls and Cooper, 2012).

Although more research is needed in this area, the results of this study and the available literature paint a complex picture of the ways in which parents’ racial socialization (a culturally relevant coping strategy) reflects approach and avoidance coping. These findings have implications for the health correlates of coping with racial discrimination. For example, experiences of racial discrimination have been found to contribute to the use of approach styles (e.g., support-seeking coping strategies and problem solving strategies) among African American adults (e.g., Brown, Phillips, Abdullah, Vinson, and Robertson, 2011; Thompson Sanders, 2006). However, other research has found that African Americans tend to respond to racism with avoidant coping rather than approach strategies (e.g., Krieger and Sydney, 1996; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Among the younger family members in Black families (adolescents), caregivers’ racial socialization (cultural coping) predicted use of approach coping strategies, but was unrelated to the use of avoidant coping strategies. While others have reported that discrimination related stress was not associated with avoidant or approach coping among middle-school aged African American youth (Gaylord-Harden and Cunningham, 2009).

Future Research

The existing literature suggests that more research is needed to unpack the coping that buffers African American families from negative health consequences of racial discrimination. Broadly, approach coping has been found to lessen the relationship between perceived discrimination and blood pressure (Clark and Adams, 2004). Still, some studies have not found protective (buffering) effects for avoidant and approach coping strategies when examining the relationship between different types of discrimination i.e., racism, sexism, etc. and health outcomes i.e., physical and mental health (see Pascoe and Smart Richman, 2009 for a review of these studies). A suitable next step would be to refine measures to examine the role of cultural coping with racism on health outcomes. Additionally, future research should examine the synergy within cultural coping approaches (those that reflect approach and avoidance) to better understand the role of this combination of messages on the health outcomes in the family. Within the current study, avoidance coping as well as approach coping were discussed in the same groups. Future research can examine if this pattern emerges at the individual level, and among a broad set of racial socialization messages. The use of latent profiles to examine differences in the patterns of racial messages that parents provide has been a promising next step (Neblett et al., 2009; Cooper and Smalls, 2010; Scottham and Smalls, 2009; Smalls, 2010).

Implications for Intervention Programming

The need for culturally relevant psychological interventions that include communal norms and values of African Americans is crucial for making a difference in the lives of
al. Parental Socialization in Response to Racism

African Americans (Jones, Hopson, and Gomes, 2012; Jordan, Bogat, and Smith, 2001). Research shows that within group variation exists in how African Americans cope with racism and this variation has implications for intervention, prevention and clinical settings (Brown et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2012). As such, one implication of this work is to inform interventions on the important role African American parents have of preparing children for how to cope with racial discrimination. The need for culturally informed parenting intervention programs that include a racial socialization component for African American families is a necessary next step for researchers and interventionists given the prevalence of racial socialization that African American families engage in (Coard, Wallace, Stevenson, and Brotman, 2004).

Since parent's cultural coping messages are often a reflection of the parent's own practice, incorporating effective cultural coping strategies into parenting interventions should bolster the positive health effects and mitigate the negative consequences of discrimination experienced by parent or child. A growing body of literature points to the importance of the larger family climate in which cultural coping (e.g., racial socialization) is provided. In general, families of color reporting a positive family climate and frequent conversations about race, had children that were high functioning (Mandara and Murray, 2002), highly engaged in school (Smalls, 2010; Smalls, 2009), and showed an avoidance of risky sexual behavior (Brody, et al., 2006). Openness in family communication and racial socialization has been related to another aspect of adjustment: African American girls' self-esteem (Thomas and King, 2007). Collectively, the results of the current study and trends in the research literature point to an examination of family climate factors that may augment the link between cultural coping and health outcomes for African American families.

CONCLUSION

The study addressed in this chapter examined ways in which cultural coping reflects variation in approach and avoidance strategies discussed by African American parents. Our findings and discussion offer insight into how cultural coping is socialized at the family level and the health implications associated with different strategies. Numerous studies have documented the deleterious health consequences of racism. Racial discrimination is one of several social factors that widen the racial health disparity for African American families. Understanding the potentially buffering effects of culturally specific coping strategies will strengthen our ability to eradicate these health consequences. Furthermore, findings from our study may augment the efforts of health programs and interventions that are pushing to understand ways in which culture and health are linked and ways to enhance the cultural relevance of their programs.

REFERENCES


Parental Socialization in Response to Racism


