**Applying the Evidence We Have: Support for Having Race Conversations in White
U.S. Families**

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SUPPORT FOR RACE CONVERSATIONS

Abstract

Popular press articles have advocated for parent-child conversations about race to prevent children from developing racial biases, yet empirical investigations of the impact of racial socialization in White U.S. families are scarce. Scott et al. (2020) caution against advising parents to engage in such conversations with their children until this topic has received sufficient empirical examination. In this comment, we draw upon the literature on (1) racial socialization, (2) parenting and parent-child discourse, and (3) the role of nonverbal communication in parental socialization to inform our understanding of parents' ability to engage in race-related conversations in the absence of empirical guidance. We also highlight emerging evidence of the potential benefits of these conversations (even if parents are uncomfortable). In sum, the wealth of existing literature suggests that parents can successfully navigate challenging conversations with their children—which tends to result in better outcomes for children than avoiding those conversations. Thus, although we support Scott et al.'s call for researchers to develop more empirical research, we part with the authors' assertion that researchers need to wait for more sufficient evidence before providing recommendations to White parents—we believe that the time for White families to begin talking about race is now.

SUPPORT FOR RACE CONVERSATIONS

Applying the Evidence We Have: Support for Having Race Conversations in White U.S. Families

From an early age, White children in the U.S. show evidence of racial bias, particularly toward Black individuals (Dunham et al., 2008; Newheiser & Olson, 2012). Popular press articles have advocated for parent-child conversations about race to prevent children from developing racial biases—or course correct when those biases are already in place. Yet, empirical investigations of the impact of racial socialization in White families are scarce. Given this notable gap in the literature, many scholars have identified an urgent need for empirical research on the topic (e.g., Loyd & Gaither, 2018; Scott et al., 2020).

In Scott et al. (2020) the authors suggest that, although there is much speculation within the popular press about the methods that would successfully lead to the reduction of White children's racial biases, these suggestions are largely based on people's intuitive beliefs, with sparse empirical evidence to support them. The authors warn that, given the lack of empirical evidence, there could be unintentional consequences to encouraging White parents to discuss race with their children, such that parents might actually do more harm than good by talking to their children about race. The authors argue that, because researchers have not yet developed (and tested) the tools to instruct parents on how they should approach these discussions, parents may lack the knowledge and skills to carry out these conversations with their children in a fruitful way (e.g., lacking an understanding of what is age appropriate and the content of those discussions). They also suggest that parents may experience anxiety while discussing these topics, which may unintentionally heighten their children's racial biases. With this in mind, the authors caution against advising parents to engage in such conversations with their children until this topic has received sufficient empirical examination. Specifically, the authors note that

SUPPORT FOR RACE CONVERSATIONS

“Although it would be desirable to prevent or reduce biases in children before the biases become deeply entrenched, it is not clear that parent-led conversations in this domain will lead to beneficial outcomes” (p. 1180).

We strongly support Scott et al.’s (2020) call for researchers to develop more empirical, experimental methods to approach these questions so that we may provide more tools to White parents as they approach these conversations with their children. But, we part with the authors’ assertion that it is “ill-advised to provide guidance” to White parents “about how to address race with their children absent the type of evidence [they] have outlined as necessary” (p. 1183). We believe that the time for parents to begin talking to their children about race is now. Our proposal is built on a bedrock of theory and empirical research (not taken into account by Scott et al.) that we believe can be used to inform our understanding of parental racial socialization until evidence of empirically tested intervention strategies becomes available. Here we review the, albeit limited, work on racial socialization, as well as the larger bodies of literature on the importance of parent-child discourse for social and moral development, parents’ ability to engage in challenging conversations with their children, and the role of nonverbal communication in parental socialization. Taken together, we believe that this literature supports the notion that, despite the fact that the empirical evidence is limited, researchers should continue to advise White parents to engage in conversations about race with their children. Finally, we highlight new work that provides preliminary evidence for the potential benefits of these conversations (even if parents are uncomfortable when discussing race and racism).

Advantages of Explicit Racial Socialization Conversations

There is a rich literature on racial discussions in families of color, which demonstrates that explicit racial socialization is generally associated with positive social outcomes for

SUPPORT FOR RACE CONVERSATIONS

children, such as more prosocial behavior (Roopnarine et al., 2014) and cross-race friendships (Tran & Lee, 2011), and more positive adjustment outcomes, such as higher self-esteem and higher academic achievement (for reviews, see Hughes et al., 2006 and Wang et al., 2020). The effects of racial socialization may vary as a function of approach and relationship quality, such that teaching children about their cultural heritage and preparing them to cope with bias seem to be most beneficial when communicated together, or when communicated in the context of a high-quality parent-child relationship (Stein et al., 2018). Relatedly, encouraging mistrust and avoidance of White people, although rare, seems to be less beneficial than other racial socialization messages (Hughes et al., 2006). Yet, overall, the bulk of the evidence indicates that racial/ethnic socialization serves as a protective factor for children of color. A recent meta-analysis of 102 studies and 27,221 participants indicated that parental racial/ethnic socialization had positive effects on children of color—predicting more positive self-perceptions (e.g., scholastic confidence, self-esteem) and better interpersonal relationship quality (e.g., social connections with their peers and family; Wang et al., 2020). The American Psychological Association has applied this research and developed detailed recommendations for how parents of color can support their child’s healthy development through positive racial socialization (American Psychological Association, 2018).

White privilege, lack of interracial contact, and other factors render race discussions in White families qualitatively different from race discussions in families of color, but there is already modest evidence that explicit racial socialization can improve White children’s attitudes toward racial outgroups (Katz, 2003; Vittrup & Holden, 2011). Investigating predictors of racial bias longitudinally in a racially mixed (50% White, 50% Black) sample of American children,

SUPPORT FOR RACE CONVERSATIONS

Katz and colleagues found that explicit racial socialization at age 3 predicted racial bias at age 6, such that parents who explicitly discussed race had children with the least racial bias (Katz, 2003). Additional evidence from Vittrup and Holden (2011) indicated that an explicit racial socialization manipulation—in which White U.S. parents were asked to have race-related conversations with their children over the course of one week—led children to show significantly more positive explicit attitudes toward Black people (relative to children in the control group). However, as noted by Scott et al. (2020), the effect among families who followed instructions was modest and compliance with the manipulation overall was low in the sample.

Scott et al. (2020) voice concerns that White parents will feel ill-equipped to discuss issues such as the history of racial inequality or race-related current events. Fortunately, there is a growing body of research that documents the ways that White parents currently approach discussing race with their children that can shed light on this issue. First, although rates of discussion are low, they are far from zero. Studies that ask White parents to report on racial discussions with their children suggest that a sizable minority of parents engage in these discussions already. Recent estimates indicate that approximately 30% of White parents in the U.S. are able to recall specific examples of race discussions with their children (Vittrup, 2018; Underhill, 2018; Zucker & Patterson, 2018). For instance, we found that 37% of White parents had discussed contemporary race-related events (e.g., the deaths of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin, or the Charleston shooting) with their child (Perry et al., 2019).

Previous studies on White parents' racial socialization methods also give us insight into the types of messages that White parents are communicating about race. Colorblindness (e.g., avoiding discussing or claiming to “not see” race, or denying the reality of racial inequality) tends to be the dominant theme in White parental racial socialization; yet, a subset of parents do

SUPPORT FOR RACE CONVERSATIONS

report color conscious socialization. For example, we found that, among the parents who discussed race with their children, 30% explicitly acknowledged the reality of racism in the U.S., either by stating that it is currently happening or by describing the history of race relations as a way of helping their child understand current events (Abaied & Perry, 2021). Zucker and Patterson (2018) observed similar messages in approximately 25% of the sample of parents who indicated they discussed race. Together, these studies tell us that many White parents are discussing race, in general, addressing race-related current events, and attempting to teach their child about the realities of racism.

In the absence of precise instructions about how to engage in racial socialization, Scott et al. (2020) speculate that White parents' anxiety about discussing race may cause them to withdraw from or avoid racial discussions altogether. As such, they insinuate that advocating for White parents to speak to their children about race without clear training on how to do so will be futile. Although anxiety may serve as a barrier for some parents (Katz, 2003), our recent work (published after the Scott et al., 2020 was published) calls this assumption into question. In our study (Abaied & Perry, 2021), we asked White parents why they had not discussed race-related current events with their children. Few parents mentioned anxiety about discussing the topic of race. Rather, the most prevalent reason was shielding, which included a desire to protect their children from a potentially violent or threatening topic, as well as a sense that race-related current events are not an appropriate discussion topic for children in general. Other prevalent reasons White parents avoided discussing these events included a passive approach—in which parents reported that the topic had not come up or that their child had not asked—or the view that discussing race is irrelevant or unimportant to their family (Abaied & Perry, 2021). Thus, rather than feeling anxious about their ability to discuss race, some White parents seem to feel

SUPPORT FOR RACE CONVERSATIONS

unmotivated to do so, or even believe that they should not do so. Our results suggest that the popular press articles that seek to increase White parents' motivation to discuss race-related current events with their children are on the right track.

Additionally, we observed evidence of improved racial attitudes using a recently developed quasi-experimental method designed to provide scaffolding for White parents to have a racial socialization conversation with their children. Specifically, we observed a significant decrease in anti-Black bias from pretest to posttest among children who viewed and discussed with their parents brief animated stories about White children displaying racial biases toward Black children. But, importantly, we also found that these effects occurred, irrespective of whether the parent showed nonverbal signals indicative of anxiety, tenseness, or physiological arousal (Perry et al., unpublished manuscript). In fact, this new evidence suggests that, under certain circumstances, parents' tenseness and physiological arousal may actually be associated with even greater decreases in children's racial biases. These findings provide some additional evidence that the authors' concerns regarding anxiety might be misguided. In the following section we draw upon literature from parenting research to help inform our understanding of parent-child conversations about race.

Evidence from Parent-Child Discourse Literature

Decades of research have established that parent-child discourse is a powerful context for children's social and moral development, including the internalization of parental values regarding prosociality, empathy, and equality (see Laible et al., 2019; Wainryb & Recchia, 2014). Parents support children's developing social-emotional skills—including theory of mind and empathy—by drawing attention to and openly discussing the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs (i.e., mental states) of other people (Tompkins et al., 2018). Critically, when parents avoid

SUPPORT FOR RACE CONVERSATIONS

discussing certain topics, children learn that those topics are unacceptable or inappropriate to talk about. This is troubling, because parents cannot understand, address, or improve their child's understanding of that which they do not discuss. In contrast, parents who approach uncomfortable or challenging topics with openness and validation of both the child's and their own emotions create opportunities for connection and change (Katz et al., 2012).

Children are highly sensitive to and motivated by parents' socialization messages, in part due to the deep emotional bonds that form between family members (Thompson, 2019). In fact, there is considerable evidence that, even with topics parents tend to avoid, they are capable of having challenging, uncomfortable, or even stressful conversations with their children (from early childhood through adolescence) when prompted (for reviews, see Branje, 2018; Wainryb & Recchia, 2014). For example, a widely used task in research on parent-adolescent interactions involves asking dyads to discuss issues that often lead to conflict at home (e.g., homework, screen time) and attempt to resolve them (Thomas et al., 2017). Similarly, research on children's emotional development often involves tasks wherein parents and children reminisce about a past event that made them feel negative emotions such as anger or sadness (van der Pol et al., 2015). Furthermore, individual differences in parent socialization during these challenging discussions are linked to social outcomes in children. For example, longitudinal research has shown that the instructions parents give to children about how to manage stressful situations, such as a challenging task or a problem with peers, predicts children's subsequent social outcomes such as aggression and friendship quality (Abaied & Stanger, 2017; Werner et al., 2014).

In order to augment the limited research on race discussions in White families, we draw upon work focused on another topic that families often consider taboo or avoid discussing: sexual activity. Correlational and experimental research clearly supports the beneficial impact of

SUPPORT FOR RACE CONVERSATIONS

parent-child discussions of sex and puberty on youth sexual health (for a review, see Coakley et al., 2017). Furthermore, interventions that target parent-child sex communication have been shown to improve adolescents' cognitive and behavioral sexual health outcomes (Coakley et al., 2017; for a review, see Sutton et al., 2014). This research clearly demonstrates that (a) if parents are encouraged to engage with an uncomfortable and commonly avoided topic for the betterment of their child's well-being, they are willing to do so, and (b) that parent-child communication can affect a targeted positive outcome in youth.

Although this parent-child discourse literature does not assess parent-child discussions of race in White families directly, it does provide strong foundational evidence that parent socialization in the context of parent-child discussions influences child outcomes. To improve White children's racial attitudes, encouraging parent-child discussions about race is a logical next step; indeed, discussions in which parents communicate values and beliefs are a basic component of parent-child relationships. By promoting such conversations, we are asking White parents to do something they are accustomed to doing, which has already proven effective with regard to a number of other domains.

Scott et al. (2020) also assert that previous adult intervention research provides evidence that encouraging parents to discuss race with their children could backfire. By drawing parallels with organizational prejudice reduction interventions, they argue that interventions of this kind can end up causing more harm than good. Specifically, they highlight evidence of employees responding defensively to diversity training or with irritation at being called away from their regular duties. However, there is no analogue among workplace associates for parent-child attachment relationships, or the natural and frequent opportunities these relationships provide to share deeply held perspectives and scaffold learning in an emotionally secure and invested

SUPPORT FOR RACE CONVERSATIONS

environment. As such, we see no reason that parental messages regarding race would be uniquely likely to elicit angry or defensive responses in children. Scott et al. (2020) also caution that organizations with diversity training have greater attrition of employees of color than organizations without them (Dobbin & Kalev, 2015). Yet, it is unstated how evidence of employee attrition rates would possibly apply to the context of White U.S families. Thus, we do not find the adult diversity training literature noted by Scott et al. (2020) to be applicable to the context of parent-child conversations about race.

Evidence from Nonverbal Behavior

Another point of concern raised by Scott et al. (2020) is that if parents engage in anxiety-provoking conversations about race with their children, the nonverbal cues they exhibit during those conversations may heighten their children's biases. They base this contention on evidence that exposure to White adults displaying negative nonverbal signals towards Black people can heighten racial biases among White children (Castelli et al., 2008). Yet, there is no evidence that this process of nonverbal learning would work similarly if parents displayed negative nonverbal signals while discussing racism. That is, we agree that if a child observed their parent directing negative nonverbal signals toward a Black person that could result in their child developing more negative attitudes toward Black people. However, we have no reason to expect that parents exhibiting nonverbal signs of anxiety or discomfort while discussing race and racism would lead children to develop more anti-Black attitudes.

Furthermore, the concern that having conversations about race introduces the potential for parents to unintentionally convey nonverbal messages about race to their children, overlooks the reality that White children are likely already receiving parental nonverbal messages about race. Parents' (and other adults') nonverbal signals and physiological arousal (Waters et al.,

SUPPORT FOR RACE CONVERSATIONS

2020) are known to influence children's social behavior (de Rosnay et al., 2006), attitudes (Castelli et al., 2008), and group prejudices (Skinner et al., 2020). Most White children in the U.S. have at least some level of exposure to people of other races from time to time, and (especially when children are young) this exposure often takes place in the presence of parents. A routine trip to the grocery store or neighborhood playground may provide children with a wealth of information about their parents' level of trust, respect, and comfort with people of other races. Even if parents deliberately attempt to control their nonverbal reactions, recent research provides evidence that parental efforts to suppress or hide discomfort may backfire (Karnilowicz et al., 2019). Although some children live in very racially homogeneous communities, they still likely have some exposure to people of other races through the media, and the subtle cues that parents provide in response to these exposures has the potential to speak volumes. Thus, even if parents feel unprepared, avoiding conversations about race does not prevent them from transmitting negative nonverbal messages to their children, but it does eliminate the potential for parents to present explicitly anti-racist messages that could challenge or overcome negative nonverbal messages.

Conclusion

We thank Scott et al. (2020) for critically evaluating the literature on parent-child conversations about race, and for formally calling for empirical literature to address the noted gaps. We believe it helps us move the conversation forward regarding the methods through which we can reduce children's racial biases. Among researchers, there is often a tension between basic and applied findings, and a question over how broadly we can generalize. When pressing issues emerge before conclusive evidence is available, researchers are faced with the question of whether to wait for that evidence or make initial recommendations based on what is

SUPPORT FOR RACE CONVERSATIONS

currently known. Sometimes, when issues are critically urgent, the most ethical approach is to draw upon what we do know and make tentative recommendations while we wait for the applied data to become available. We maintain that the wealth of existing literature suggests that parents can successfully navigate challenging conversations with their children—and that talking about uncomfortable and taboo topics tends to result in better outcomes for children than avoiding those topics altogether. We hope that our review of the broader parent-child discourse and nonverbal communication literature—as well as our new and in progress work on parental racial socialization methods—provides additional evidence for the potential benefits of these conversations.

SUPPORT FOR RACE CONVERSATIONS

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SUPPORT FOR RACE CONVERSATIONS

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