Mother-daughter relationships, self-esteem & problem-solving: Do socialization practices matter?"

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This article addresses how racial/ethnic socialization practices shape self-esteem and influence problem-solving skills among African Americans. Attachment theory provides a conceptual model for understanding the importance of the parent-child relationship with regard to stress management. Empirical studies bolster the discussion of culturally relevant socialization practices that influence whether stress management among African American women is reduced or increased with each generation. The article concludes with practice, research, and pedagogical implications.

Keywords: Socialization, Black women, problem solving

INTRODUCTION

The family provides the primary context in which children acquire the skills for coping with stress (Hammen et al., 2012). Specifically, the family influences the coping behaviors of children in three ways: direct socialization of coping; supportive, cohesive, structured family environments; and parental models for coping (Monti, Rudolph, & Abaied, 2014). Although empirical proof supports the role of these pathways on child coping, there is a scarcity of research on the association between family processes and coping with African American children explicitly. Moreover, the available research with African American children demonstrates the influence of maternal support on child coping varies by gender. Given that stressors are potent precipitants of biological and physiological problems (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2010) further exploration of stress patterns and coping processes and intergenerational transmission is warranted.

According to the National Women’s Health Information Center (National Women’s Health Information Center [NWHIC], 2009), race, gender, and class significantly impact stress-related incidents and coping. Black women face the same struggles as White women; however, they have to face issues of diversity on top of inequality (Hall, Everett, & Hamilton-Mason, 2012). The lack of empirical concern for Black women and an understanding of their sociocultural environment is apparent in the stress and coping literature as well. Hall et al. (2012) concluded that variations in problem solving, adaptability, and coping behaviors were responsible for stressors experienced by African American women.¹

The results from other studies indicate a relationship between self-esteem and stress (Lin & Yusoff, 2013; Power, 2004; Thomas & King, 2007). Researchers have also found that self-esteem

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appears to moderate the effects of stress on psychological functioning (Hall et al., 2012; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Individuals with low self-esteem exhibit more distress from negative events than those with high self-esteem. In a study of African American mothers and daughters, Turnage (2004) found that self-esteem might protect the individual from distress by allowing the individual to feel less vulnerable and better able to bounce back from stressful situations. High self-esteem may also result in more active and effective coping and in enhanced motivation in response to stress (Davis-Maye & Perry, 2007; Turnage, 2004).

Research suggests that cross-generational continuities in parent-child relationships may well be mediated by psychological characteristics that individuals develop, e.g., self-esteem or self-efficacy, in part, as a result of experiences in their family of origin (Brannen, 2006; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). In a study of a nationally representative sample of U.S. Black (N = 1,330) and White (N = 3,797) girls and their mothers, Ridolfo, Chepp, and Milkie (2013) show Black girls have higher self-esteem and sense of control than White girls, and Black mothers’ relationship with their daughters and stronger encouragement of daughters’ independence in part explain race differences in self-evaluations. Perceived stress and self-esteem in Black women, that is, mothers and daughters, have not been fully evaluated. Understanding precisely how the process of intergenerational transmission operates with regard to family dynamics, for example, problem solving, coping behaviors, and communication styles, will increase our understanding of stress management (Bierman & Milkie, 2008).

Black women from every walk of life face similar and overlapping challenges to the actualization of their success: racial and gender discrimination, oppressive cultural expectations, and illness due to the resulting stress. A recent study led by researchers at the University of Georgia found that racial discrimination takes a biological toll on the body of many of those individuals subjected to it. The results from the study show that African American youth who experience frequent incidents of discrimination are more likely than others to develop heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and stroke (Brody et al., 2013). The greater risk of these diseases was found to arise from more than socioeconomic class disadvantages. Social workers need to know how to intervene in order to stop the intergenerational perpetuation of family problems. This article discusses how the parent-child bond and socialization practices influence self-esteem and impact coping behaviors.

**ATTACHMENT AND COPING**

Parents are a key resource as children learn to cope with stress, making socialization of coping a critical parenting task. Socialization of coping refers to parenting behaviors that communicate to children possible ways of coping with stress (Rutter et al., 2001). Attachment theory is a distinctive area in which interpersonal relationships and responses to stress intersect. Bowlby (1988) proposed the attachment relationship allows infants to elicit caregivers’ response when experiencing distress. Over time, infants develop internal representations, or internal working models, of attachment experiences, which organize their approach to stress over time. Internal working models include implicit beliefs about the caregiver (e.g., availability in times of distress) and the self (e.g., ability to overcome distress or worthiness of support) (Bowlby, 1988). Internal working models that have been assessed through past caregiving experiences shape how adults approach stress. The association between early attachment experiences and adult attachment styles has also been examined in retrospective studies. Hazan and Shaver (1994) found that adults who were secure in their romantic relationships were more likely to recall their childhood relationships with parents as being affectionate, caring, and accepting (Feeney & Noller, 1990). To assess attachment in romantic relationships, Hazan and Shaver (1994) developed adult analogues to Ainsworth’s (1985) original infant attachment categories. Secure adults feel comfortable having close relationships, depending on partners, and providing partners with support. Insecure-avoidant adults are uncomfortable with close relationships,
mutual dependence, and intimacy. Insecure-ambivalent adults have an unsatisfied desire for extreme closeness with others and fear abandonment. Each classification is associated with a distinct pattern of responding to stress.

Secure internal working models facilitate a flexible, generally capable response pattern wherein individuals effectively confront and resolve stressors (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003). Secure adults are likely to employ productive engagement coping strategies (e.g., problem solving or seeking support) in response to stress (Belsky, 2005). Avoidant internal working models reflect a deactivated pattern of responding to stress through dampened arousal (Mikulincer et al., 2003). Avoidant adults attempt to distance themselves from emotions or stress-related stimuli, halt or conceal negative arousal, and use disengagement coping strategies (e.g., avoidance, denial) in response to stress (Belsky, 2005). Ambivalent (or highly anxious) internal working models contribute to a hyperactive, dysregulated, pattern of responding to stress. In response to stress, ambivalent adults become compulsively overly involved with their own emotional distress and fail to achieve relief or resolve stressors. Although avoidant and ambivalent adults appear to respond differently to distress, similar patterns of ineffective coping among both avoidant and ambivalent groups have been reported (Belsky, 2005).

Adult attachment also has implications for parenting. A central tenet of adult attachment theory is that internal working models contribute to the intergenerational transmission of attachment (i.e., parent’s adult attachment predicts their offspring’s attachment) in part through parent-child interactions (Belsky, 2005). Research supports a connection between adult attachment and parenting-related cognitions and behaviors. Mothers who were highly anxious recalled more involvement than less anxious mothers in a parent-child discussion of a conflictual memory. Children of the highly anxious mothers experienced more internalizing and externalizing symptoms, which suggests that this involvement inhibited the child’s recovery from distress (Belsky, 2005). Insecure adults also report lower self-efficacy and heightened stress in parental roles than do secure adults. In addition, when compared to secure mothers, insecure mothers also feel less close to their children and are less supportive, less responsive, and more intrusive during mother-child interactions. In sum, secure attachment provides resources for adaptive coping with distress and success in parenting, whereas insecure attachment represents a risk factor for ineffective coping and maladaptive parenting. Socialization of coping lies at the intersection of these systems, making adult attachment an important contributing factor to the coping suggestions parents make to their children. Given that attachment focuses on close relationships, attachment may be most relevant to socialization when the child experiences interpersonal stress and coping with a variety of noninterpersonal stressors. Socialization occurs within the parent-child relationship. Monti et al. (2014) researched explicit socialization coping by examining whether maternal attachment contributes to the coping suggestions mothers make to their children (N = 157) about coping with stress. The results from their study indicate insecure adult attachment not only limits an individual’s coping, but also extends to a broad approach to distress and challenge. A parent’s insecure attachment likely influences children’s exposure to both parental modeling and direct parental guidance about effective coping. The results corroborate and extend links between insecure adult attachment and ineffective coping strategies, revealing that insecure adults communicate their maladaptive approaches toward stress to their children via coping suggestions (Monti et al., 2013, p. 652). Socialization of coping may be a mechanism by which mother’s insecure working models heightens children’s risk for maladaptive stress responses, relationship difficulties, or psychopathology.

In a 2013 study, Roubinov and Luecken examined whether maternal emotional functioning—emotional awareness and depression—guides the coping suggestions mothers make to their children in the context of a common childhood stressor (peer victimization). Across two waves of a longitudinal study, 330 mothers and their second graders (mean age = 7.95 years, SD = 0.33; 158 boys and 172 girls) completed questionnaires. Emotional awareness predicted more primary
control engagement suggestions (directly addressing stress or emotions). Depression predicted fewer cognitive restructuring suggestions (thinking positively) and more cognitive avoidance suggestions (orienting thoughts away from stress). Interactive effects between maternal emotional functioning and child sex also emerged. This results from this study elucidates the impact of mothers’ emotional functioning on how they teach their children to cope with stress (Roubinov & Luecken, 2013). The purpose of the 2013 study by Gaylord-Harden, Elmore, and Montes was to examine the impact of three parental influences (i.e., socialization of coping, modeling of coping, and the parent-child relationship) on coping strategies of African American children, as well as child gender as a moderator of these associations. Participants were 83 African American children (mean age = 11.2, SD = 1.44) and their maternal caregivers (mean age = 40.45, SD = 9.55). Both children and parents completed measures of coping behaviors, parental socialization of coping, and maternal support. Regression analyses demonstrated that child reports of their mothers’ behavior were better predictors of child coping than mothers’ self-reports, with child reports of maternal support and socialization of coping predicting child coping. Results also revealed that child gender moderated the association between maternal parenting behavior and child coping. Specifically, maternal parenting behaviors were more important for girls’ coping strategies than for boys’ coping strategies. These results add to the literature on the effects of parent-child relationships on children’s responses to stress (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2013).

Exposure to family conflict in childhood increases risk for later life psychological maladjustment. The family environment shapes the development of coping strategies used to manage interpersonal stressors, representing a pathway through which adverse family experiences impact later emotional functioning. In two studies, McElroy & Hevey (2014) evaluated engagement and disengagement coping as mediators of the relation between family conflict in childhood and depressive symptoms in young adulthood. Study 1 included participants from continuously married families exposed to higher and lower quality childhood family environments and found that disengagement partially mediated the relation between family conflict and depressive symptoms. Study 2 examined these relations among emerging adults who experienced parental divorce. Results indicated that disengagement coping fully mediated the relation between family conflict and depression. Engagement did not emerge as a mediator in either study. Elevated family conflict across varying family structures might be associated with poor adjustment via disengaged responses to stress.

There is a need to better understand family processes related to recovery from past stressful life events. Jobes-Shields, Parra, and Buckholdt (2013) investigated links between perceptions of parental awareness regarding stressful life events, continued event-related rumination, and current symptoms of depression. Students at a diverse, urban university completed a Life Events Checklist and a semistructured interview regarding family processing of stressful life events, as well as self-report measures of event-related rumination and depression. Results indicated that perceptions of mothers’ and fathers’ awareness of sadness regarding stressful life events as well as mothers’ and fathers’ verbal event processing predicted symptoms of event-related rumination and depression. These findings support the inclusion of perceptions of parental awareness in the understanding of how emerging adults continue to cope with past stressful life events (Jobes-Shields et al., 2013). Lin and Yushoff (2013) also found that Black adolescents utilized positive coping responses when confronted with racism and/or sexism if they had discussed their feelings with peers and/or adult caregivers.

SOCIALIZATION PROCESSES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES

Because race is a central factor in the American experience, one of the greatest challenges facing parents has always been to counter pervasive, destructive stereotypes and myths about Black
people. Oftentimes, destructive stereotypes of African Americans undermine the confidence and self-esteem of children and threaten their success and well-being. One important aspect of socialization process for Black parents is racial socialization, defined as parents’ “attempt to prepare their children for the realities of being Black in America” (Hill, 2001, p. 497). Black children are inundated with images that associate authority, beauty, goodness, and power with whiteness. Through racial socialization Black parents teach their children to expect and cope with racism and racial exclusion while not allowing it to become a rationale for failure or despair. Racial socialization includes efforts to build children’s self-concepts. Maintaining a positive self-identity and sense of esteem can be difficulty in the face of continuing economic inequality. Economic deprivation and racism have made it impractical if not impossible for many Black people to create shared divisions between male and female roles or to divide family labor into gendered categories of economic and domestic work. Evidence strongly supports the contention that Black women have escaped the confines of the restrictive gender roles assumed by White women, mostly because they have had to assume heavy responsibility for paid work, family, and community (Andersen & Collins, 2013). These roles have undermined male privilege and power in Black families and led to definitions of womanhood among Blacks that include achievement, work, and independence. As a result, it is commonly held that African American daughters, from an early age, are taught to assume strong family roles and to be strong, self-reliant, and independent. According to Andersen and Collins (2013), all Black children are taught to mother and are instilled with similar traits of assertiveness, willfulness, and independence. Similarly, Scott (2003, p. 523) states, Black daughters are socialized to be independent and assertive as well as family-centered and nurturing … to be sexually assertive … to be as authoritative, individualistic and confident as African America sons are, and as economically self-sufficient and personally autonomous as sons are.

Whereas gender neutrality is the child-rearing norm among Black parents, studies show that parental perceptions of the opportunity structure their children will encounter also affect their child-rearing methods (Mandera, Murray, Telesford, Fatima, & Richman, 2012). Understanding that their sons face many obstacles and even dangers in expressing masculinity, parents may develop higher expectations for daughters than for sons and be more tolerant and self-indulgent with sons. Some research suggests that Black parents support competence and self-reliance more in daughters than sons. There is also evidence that these differing expectations are reflected in racial socialization messages; according to Scott (2003, p. 529), “Black male adolescents were more likely to be cautioned about racial barriers, where young women were more likely to be socialized with reference to racial pride.” Given this insight it is important to understand how such expectations impact the socialization processes and subsequent coping behaviors of Black females. Maintaining a positive self-identity and sense of self-esteem can be difficult in the face of confronting racism and sexism. Other studies have found the experience of racial discrimination is related to low levels of life satisfaction and happiness and high levels of psychological distress (Lin & Yusoff, 2013).

COPING WITH DAILY HASSLES

The African American mother faces truly unique challenges. She must contend with both racism and sexism (Gonzales, Cauce, & Mason, 2005). Every day she is faced with negative stereotypes about her race and gender on television and in magazines and newspapers. In addition, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013), African American females are more likely than any other group to face economic challenges. Besides economic-, racial-, and gender-based difficulties, the African American mother faces the difficulty of imparting an Afrocentric ideology within a Eurocentric culture. Whereas a Eurocentric cultural view focuses on individualism, materialism, reason, and differences, an Afrocentric cultural view stresses community, spirituality, affect, and
similarities (Kellerhals, Ferreira, & Perrenoud, 2002). Studies examining intergenerational transmission of parenting behaviors (Belsky, 2005; Brannen, 2006; Dechman, 1994; Frances, 1994) have suggested the existence of an indirect link between adult and child parenting through the effects of the adult’s parenting on the child’s psychological functioning. Intergenerational theory suggests that self-esteem affects parenting and well-being in the first and second generations. Socialization into gender-specific roles has been found to begin in early childhood when boys are provided with incentives for engaging in family-independent activities while girls are rewarded for engaging in family-dependent activities such as attending family functions (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). Research has indicated that whereas socialization into masculinity involves separation from the home, socialization into femininity involves maintaining family ties. As a result, women are found to be more involved in activities that maintain relationships and are more constrained by their experiences in their families of origin when adapting to their families of procreation. Supporting research has indicated that mothers spend greater amounts of time interacting with their children than do fathers (Ainsworth, 1985; Bowlby, 1988; Montiroso et al., 2012). Because of this greater involvement, what children learn about relationships and behavior is done primarily in association with their mothers. Others (Belsky, 2005; Bierman & Milkie, 2008; Brannen, 2006) agree and contend that significant relational patterns are passed from generation to generation primarily through women. Parents are often cited as significant others who influence the self-esteem of children.

It has been commonly assumed that a positive sense of self promotes and maintains psychological health (Bengston, Biblarz, & Roberts, 2002), buffers the individual from stress and is associated with positive coping strategies and emotional states. Adults’ relationships with their parents in their family of origin affected their psychological health in terms of self-esteem and well-being. These psychological characteristics were carried forward to affect the next generation through the parenting of their own children. Research has indicated that those parents who have positive interactions with their children as evidenced by a more authoritative parenting style can be expected to have children who develop high self-esteem (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). Compas et al. (2001) suggested that from prior relationships, individuals carry forward ways of thinking and behaving that influence the way they function in relationships in their families of procreation. This is called the “emergent family system” (Belsky, 2005) and emphasizes that individuals establish trajectories that affect how subsequent families’ function. The results from a study conducted by Dechman (1994) indicate the relationship with parent (first generation) to self-esteem and well-being of the adult (second generation) to the parenting of the children (third generation) is crucial to effective coping strategies to combat racism.

**DISCUSSION**

According to Gene Brody, lead author of numerous studies on resilience and director of the University of Georgia Center for Family Research, “Exposure to racial discrimination during childhood and adolescence will have negative effects on the functioning of biological stress regulatory systems and, ultimately, on health” (Brody et al., 2013, p. 1286). Black women encounter a number of stressors as result of their race, sex, and structural position in American society. As victims of both racism and sexism, some writers have emphasized the “double jeopardy” status of Black women. Belonging as they do to two groups that have traditionally been treated as inferiors by American society—Blacks and women—they have been “doubly invisible” (Anderson & Collins, 2013). Although the lives of Black women have usually been examined in the behavioral science literature from a “problems framework,” most Black women are required to function in stressful environments (Hall et al., 2012). Historically, Black women have demonstrated significant coping abilities; however, their resourcefulness and adaptability to
varied roles “cannot overshadow the fact that Black women have difficult environments to contend
with and resultant stressors” (Kellerhals et al., 2002, p. 224).

Black women have the highest prevalence of hypertension in the world, and depression is
associated with both hypertension and lack of health-promoting behaviors. Thus, it is important to
identify factors that may contribute to depression in hypertensive women. A cross-sectional study
was conducted with a convenience sample of 80 Black women aged 18–60, who were prescribed
antihypertensive medication (Abel, Crane, & McCoy, 2014). Abel et al. collected data using self-
report instruments. The study showed that lower income level, greater number of comorbidities,
lower active coping scores, and poorer medication adherence were significantly associated with
higher depression scores. Drawing from a distress-deterring perspective, McKinley (2013) used
structural equation modeling to investigate whether college students’ perceived emotional support
indirectly led to reduced stress, greater adaptive coping response, and healthier behavior through
problem-solving confidence. Results showed that the association between emotional support and
lower levels of perceived stress, more general adaptive coping response, and reduced alcohol
consumption was fully mediated by problem-solving confidence. This suggests that researchers and
health practitioners should seek to isolate the types of supportive messages that will most likely
elicit greater self-confidence.

Attention to stress is especially important when the physical outcomes of poor mental health is
considered. A survey of African-American working women noted, for example, that women who
reported themselves under stress experienced more health symptoms (such as muscle aches,
eyestrain, depression) and actual health effects (high blood pressure, gastritis) than did women
who experienced less stress (Abel et al., 2014). Similarly, research has shown that there is a
correlation between stress, race/sex, substance abuse, and long-term physical side effects
(Abel et al.).

Black families socialize their girls not only to take the roles of wife and mother, but to assume
the role of the breadwinner. Developing a voice, independence, and becoming a breadwinner have
been linked to historical marginalization of Black men in the workforce (Hill, 2001). As a result,
Black families had to raise their daughters in ways that would facilitate their girl’s ability to assume
partial, if not full, responsibility for the financial survival of their families upon becoming women
(Hill, 2001; Hughes et al., 2006). Some researchers argue this orientation is positive adaptation;
unlike White women, particularly upper-middle-class White women, Black women are not neces-
sarily expected to silence their thoughts, experiences, and desires in relations with others. The
African American woman has been the “least understood person in the history of this country”
(Hill, 2001, p. 506). Black women generally represent neglected subjects, yet they are the victims
in American society of racism, sexism, and, if they are poor, classism. While Black girls maintain
high self-esteem throughout adolescence when compared to their White and Latina counterparts,
the same voice and power that is said to protect women against the loss of esteem and loss of
culturally specific gendered self are also said to place them at risk and impair their ability to
employ effective coping strategies when they confront racism and sexism (Carlson & Grant, 2006;
Hall et al., 2012).

Discrimination (e.g., racism and or sexism) is a stressor that has a deleterious effect on the
mental and physical health of African Americans. Besides learning how to approach difficult,
although manageable, situations, children must learn which specific coping strategies are most
effective in which situations. According to Power (2004, p. 274), “a major way that parents
influence how their children cope with stress is by influencing specific events that their children
are exposed to or by influencing how children are exposed to these events, or both.” Racial
socialization, as it relates to racism, is argued to promote and enhance not only effective coping but
also psychological strength to resist and overcome racial oppression and devaluation (Scott, 2003).
To empower Black children to effectively assess racism and sexism, parents should (and often do)
model when to employ approach and or avoidant coping strategies. Some researchers believe that
the use of strategies that avoid stressors or manage emotional reaction to stressors are generally related to greater distress and lower feelings of self-efficacy; others, such as Shorter-Gooden (2004) and Hall et al. (2012), who have examined stress and coping among Black women found that employing avoidant coping strategies enabled them to successfully thrive in a racist and sexist work environment. Moreover, Scott found that the frequency to which African American adolescents received socialization messages concerning racism from their parents was related to the use of approach coping strategies but unrelated to avoidance coping strategies. Participants who reported a high frequency of messages from parents about how to deal with racism, the history of racism in the lives of African Americans, and family member’s specific experiences with racism were more likely to cope with discriminatory experiences by telling friends or family members what happened or relying on their own personal resources and knowledge to deal with it. In sum, evidence supports positive parenting influence on child coping behaviors, and positive parenting characteristics generally encourage the use of more active and support-seeking coping strategies.

CONCLUSION

The lack of empirical concern for African American women and an understanding of their socio-cultural environment are apparent in the stress and coping literature. When research has been conducted on African Americans, the focus tended to be on African American men, and when research has been conducted with women, the focus has tended to be on White women. With the exception of a few notable studies (Davis-Maye & Perry, 2007; Dechman, 1994; Frances, 1994; Hall et al., 2004; Shorter-Gooden, 2004) scholars have largely overlooked African American women. Their experiences, and realities are often assumed to be identical to those of African American men and White women. There is a need to recognize the variability among African American women as well as to understand the differences between race and gender groups, in particular intergenerational differences. In spite of the potential promise, there has been limited discussion on the degree of the effectiveness of coping strategies in particular contexts, e.g., racism and sexism, specifically, with regard to Black mothers and daughters. Researchers should explore key factors related to intergenerational transmission of problem-solving techniques. Finally, successful practice interventions must include an examination of the Afrocentric child rearing practices that impact Black females’ self-esteem and coping.

NOTE

1. The term Black refers to individuals of African, Caribbean, Central American, or South American descent.

REFERENCES


