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Sharing stories of discrimination with parents

Linda P. Juang [a,*], Moin Syed [b]

[a] University of California at Santa Barbara, United States
[b] University of Minnesota, United States

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A B S T R A C T

In this study we examined whether experiences of discrimination during childhood and adolescence were told to parents, the reasons for *not* telling, and whether telling was associated with adolescent characteristics and aspects of the current parent–child relationship. The sample included 200 ethnically diverse college students. Results supported a transactional view of socialization whereby youth who had not shared their discrimination stories expected negative parental reactions or were concerned for their parents' well-being. The likelihood of telling was not directly associated with ethnicity, gender, or parent–child communication. Rather, those who rated the discrimination event as more important and reported greater current parental cultural and racial socialization were more likely to have disclosed their story of discrimination, depending on ethnicity. Understanding disclosure of discrimination experiences is important. When adolescents choose not to share experiences of discrimination with their parents, there may be lost opportunities for a greater understanding of these challenging experiences.

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We know that racial/ethnic discrimination, defined as unfair, differential treatment based on one's race or ethnicity (García-Coll et al., 1996), is hurtful (Huynh & Fuligni, 2010). We also know that parents actively socialize their children by transmitting messages concerning race and discrimination (Hughes et al., 2006). However, we know less about how youth make sense of discriminatory experiences and whether youth share these experiences with important others, such as parents. Although it has long been recognized that socialization does not flow only from parent to child, few studies have examined the active role that children play in ethnic–racial socialization (Hughes et al., 2006). In this study, we examine college students' stories of discrimination that happened during childhood or adolescence to better understand the phenomenon of experiencing discrimination, particularly around the reciprocal nature of parent–child socialization.

Parent ethnic–racial socialization

Parent ethnic–racial socialization refers to the "transmission of information from adults to children regarding race and ethnicity" (Hughes et al., 2006, p. 748). Families of all ethnic/racial backgrounds engage in this type of socialization (Hughes et al., 2006). *Racial socialization* refers to the ways in which parents teach their children how to cope with being devalued in society, focusing on issues of discrimination, racism, and barriers to opportunities. *Cultural socialization* refers to the ways in

* Corresponding author. Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, Psychology East Bldg, 3818, University of California at Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA 93106, United States.
E-mail address: juang@psych.ucsb.edu (L.P. Juang).

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which parents preserve and transmit heritage-cultural practices and traditions to their children (Hughes et al., 2006; Tran & Lee, 2010). Studies of racial and cultural socialization have primarily focused on the frequency and content of messages that parents transmit to their children such as cultural heritage, preparation for bias, promotion of mistrust, and egalitarianism. Preparation for bias has been linked to both positive and negative adjustment for adolescents (Davis & Stevenson, 2006; Harris-Britt, Valrie, Kurtz-Costes, & Rowley, 2007; Hughes, Witherspoon, Rivas-Drake, & West-Bey, 2009), while promotion of trust has been predominantly linked to negative adjustment (Hughes et al., 2006). These studies highlight the importance of examining specific aspects of racial socialization separately as each aspect can have different implications for adolescent adjustment.

One key limitation of existing research is the dearth of studies exploring both sides of the socialization process (Hughes et al., 2006). Clearly, both parents and children contribute intimately to this process. However, we still know much more about the messages parents transmit to their children compared to how children shape and interpret what messages their parents transmit. Our study contributes to the understudied side of the socialization process by focusing on whether children tell their parents about their experiences with discrimination and if not, reasons for withholding that information.

Sharing negative experiences with parents

Discussing negative events with parents is an important way that children develop coping skills and make meaning of their experiences (Bird & Reese, 2006; Fivush, Hazzard, McDermott Sales, Sarfati, & Brown, 2003; Pasupathi, McLean, & Weeks, 2009). One such potentially negative event is experiencing racial/ethnic discrimination. Experiencing racial/ethnic discrimination highlights the stigma and devaluation attached to being a part of a racial/ethnic group. Importantly, experiencing discrimination is a major stressor for both ethnic minority and majority individuals (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; García-Coll et al., 1996; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Sharing stories of discrimination serves the important functions of helping youth validate their experiences, regulate their emotions, make meaning of the experience, and reframe the experience to better cope (McLean & Thorne, 2003; Syed, 2012; Thorne, 2000).

In the current study we were interested in what prevented youth from sharing stories of discrimination with their parents. According to the transactional model of development (Sameroff & MacKenzie, 2003), the parent–adolescent relationship (its history and quality that is built up through daily interactions over time) and characteristics of the adolescent, are necessary to understand adolescent behaviors, which in turn affect the parent–adolescent relationship and adolescent development. In our study we focus on several aspects of the parent–adolescent relationship as well as aspects of the adolescent in order to understand why some youth are more likely to have disclosed experiences of discrimination versus not. Literature on disclosure has focused on topics such as whether adolescents disclose to their parents about what they do in their free time, whether they engage in risky behaviors, who they are dating, who their friends are, and personal feelings towards schoolwork and self (Smetana, Villalobos, Tasopoulos-Chan, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2009; Tilton-Weaver et al., 2010; Yau, Tasopoulos-Chan, & Smetana, 2009). Studies of disclosure have not yet focused on experiences of discrimination. And although experiences of discrimination are common for youth in the United States, studies have not yet examined *why* youth may not share these experiences with their parents and, consequently, lose opportunities for validation, feedback, and support.

Who is more likely to tell stories of discrimination?

Specific parenting behaviors are effective for specific parenting goals (Grusec & Davidov, 2010). If the socialization goal is to have children who are willing to share experiences of discrimination with their parents, parents must engage in specific behaviors that lead to that goal. In other words, targeted discussions over issues of racism and discrimination, rather than general discussions of culture, may be necessary. Thus, we hypothesize that youth who report greater current racial and cultural socialization would be more likely to have shared their stories of discrimination as children or adolescents, but that greater racial socialization (compared to cultural socialization) would be more strongly associated with whether a story was shared or not with a parent. In our study we asked youth to recall experiences of discrimination during childhood or adolescence. We also asked them to report the extent to which their parents engaged in racial and cultural socialization currently. If current levels of parental socialization are related to whether youth shared their story of discrimination at an earlier point in time, we take this as support for a transactional view of development. Namely, sharing stories as an adolescent may contribute to an evolving pattern of interaction whereby sharing elicits greater parental racial and cultural socialization over time.

Another important relationship context is openness of parent–child communication. Youth disclose more in the context of positive parenting (e.g., greater parental acceptance and trust), and less in the context of negative parenting (e.g., greater fear of parent rejection and unresponsiveness) (Engels, Finkenauer, & van Kooten, 2006; Tilton-Weaver et al., 2010). Thus, if youth assume that their parents are not likely to listen, let alone understand their perspectives, they may be less likely to share their stories. We hypothesize that greater current levels of open parent–child communication will also be related to the greater likelihood of having shared stories of discrimination. Similar to parental racial and cultural socialization, if current levels of parent–child communication are related to whether youth shared their story of discrimination at an earlier point in time, we presume that adolescent sharing may have led to greater parent–child openness in communication over time.

In addition to aspects of the parent–child relationship, two adolescent characteristics, gender and ethnicity, may be related to why a story is more likely to be told to parents. Because females tend to report more intimate relationships with their mothers and tend to share more information with their parents than males (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006), we