



Ethnic-Racial Socialization in Multiracial Families: Emerging Findings and Future Directions

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This special issue focuses on ethnic-racial socialization practices in multiracial families, in large part, because this topic is one that is steeply rising in importance and influence in the United States and elsewhere. Yet this collection was also motivated by the simultaneously deeply under-investigated nature of this area, both in the broader context of parenting research, as well as in research on ethnic-racial socialization in particular. Several contributors to this special issue speak to the importance of learning more about parent and caregiver socialization in multiracial families when they observe that the population of multiracial youth in the United States has increased by 276% over the last decade (US Census Bureau, 2021; Vezaldenos et al., 2023), that more than 1 in 7 children born in the United States today have parents from different ethnic-racial backgrounds (Alba et al., 2018; Seider et al., 2023), and that multiracial youth represent the fastest growing demographic in the United States (Csizmadia & Atkin, 2022). At the same time, contributors to this special issue also point out the dearth of research on multiracial families (Atkin et al., 2023; Green & Bryant, 2023). In fact, in 2019, a review of ethnic-racial socialization research with multiracial Americans by Atkin and Yoo found there to be only 21 articles across the literature reporting on this topic. This lack of empirical attention makes it impossible for youth development scholars and professionals across fields to adequately meet our professional and ethical obligations to avoid harm and to promote optimal development for multiracial young people (Jackson & Samuels, 2011). In response, this special issue convenes both established and emerging voices on parenting in multiracial families to advance this body of scholarship collectively.

There are a number of political, cultural, and logistical reasons for this dearth of research on family socialization in multiracial families. As Green and Bryant (2023) point out, it was only 55 years ago that the United States Supreme Court struck down state laws banning interracial marriages. Those laws represented a foundational structural component of both racism and monoracism—or racism directed toward individuals who do not identify as monoracial (Johnston & Nadal, 2010)—in the United States. These structural barriers were of course coupled with grotesquely personal sentiments, such as the Virginia General Assembly’s 1691 description of children from interracial unions as “abominable mixtures” (Livingstone & Brown, 2017). While societal views may have shifted, in research, barriers to understanding and exploring multiracial America have endured. Seider et al. (2023) note it was only in 2000 that the United States Census began allowing individuals to identify as multiracial by checking off more than one racial category. These limitations and other political factors have unquestionably reduced the number of researchers willing and able to investigate family socialization in multiracial families. Additionally, Atkin and colleagues (2023, 2019) have pointed out logistical challenges to researching family socialization in multiracial families related to both varying definitions of this population and the tremendous diversity in family composition (and their unique experiences) within the broader multiracial group.

Even in this current issue focused on relevant parenting practices in multiracial families, there are meaningful differences in how different contributors conceptualize this population. For example, Akin et al. (2023) describe their sample of *multiracial young adults* as individuals who report having “biological parents from two or more of the following groups: white, African American/black, Asian/Asian American, Pacific Islander, Latino(a), American Indian, Middle Eastern/Arab American.” Another study (Vezaldenos et al., 2023) defines *multiracial families* more broadly as “a household in which two or more ethnic-racial

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identities are represented.” Cardwell and colleagues (2023) invoke the term *multiethnic-racial families* to refer to families led by parents “from two different ethnic-racial backgrounds, at least one of which is considered a minoritized ethnic-racial background in the United States” In a footnote, they acknowledge that race and ethnicity are not entirely synonymous, but that they also perceive race and ethnicity to be “inseparable at the level of lived experience, especially due to the United States’ inconsistent process of racializing ethnic groups.” Finally, two other studies in this special issue focus specifically on “Biracial black-white” young adults raised in multiracial families (Green & Bryant, 2023) and “black +” young adults raised in multiracial families that included one black or African American parent and one parent from a different ethnic-racial group(s). These differences and distinctions across several of the papers in this special issue highlight one of the challenges to carrying out and/or attempting to consolidate research that identifies generalizable aspects of ethnic-racial socialization in families representing multiple racial groups.

Despite these and other challenges to research, the distinct contours of both manner and context of socialization practices across these articles allow each of these studies to make clear and distinct contributions to the extant literature. Seider and colleagues (2023) draw on interviews with parents from a diverse range of multiracial families to offer several specific practices that these parents describe as having facilitated their own and their co-parent’s ability to share their respective cultural assets with their children. One notable finding in this study is that relatively few of the parents in this sample described practices for explicitly recognizing, acknowledging, and embracing their children’s identity as multiracial individuals. Importantly, several other studies in this special issue sought to explore this grappling between monoracial parents’ own racial identities and their recognition of their children’s multiracial individuality in different ways.

First, Atkin and colleagues (2023) take up this issue by making use of a “Familial Support of Multiracial Experiences” Scale that they developed and validated in earlier work. This scale assesses the extent to which multiracial individuals describe their family members as acknowledging their unique experiences and challenges as multiracial persons, as well as these family members’ embrace of their multiracial children belonging to multiple racial groups. In the present study, the authors report that parental support of their children’s multiracial experiences was significantly associated with these children’s feelings of pride in their multiracial identities. They also report that multiracial young adults report white parents demonstrating less support for multiracial experiences than either monoracial parents of color or multiracial parents. The authors do not present these findings as evidence of innate or immutable parent roles,

but rather to suggest that parents from different racial identity groups may, on average, bring into their parent–child relationships different levels of comfort and familiarity with racial dynamics in the United States and their implications for raising multiracial children.

Green and Bryant (2023) also consider this issue of parental support of multiracial experiences in their study of “parent racial humility,” which they conceptualize as parenting approaches that acknowledge that a biracial child’s racial experiences will differ from that of either of their monoracial parents. In their study of biracial black-white adolescents and young adults, Green and Bryant report that these young people’s assessments of their parents’ racial humility were significantly and positively associated with their reports of parent–child closeness. These reports also varied as a function of parents’ race and gender. Similar to Atkin et al.’s (2023) work described above, these results do not necessarily point to unalterable parenting dynamics, but to the idea that it may be particularly important for parents from specific demographic groups to be mindful of the perspective they convey about their children’s biracial experiences.

Finally, Cardwell and colleagues (2023) draw on a concept from communication accommodation theory, parental identity accommodation, that refers to the extent to which parents effectively communicate their recognition and affirmation of their child’s multiethnic-racial background. In this study of multiethnic-racial young adults, these scholars report that participants’ assessments of both maternal and paternal identity accommodation were significantly associated with several different measures of these participants’ psychosocial wellbeing. Cardwell and colleagues observe that these findings suggest the distinct value of color-conscious parenting in multiethnic-racial families that acknowledges children’s multiracial identities, particularly when set against color-evasive parenting.

The final two papers in this special issue both explicitly consider ethnic-racial socialization in multiracial families in the United States in the context of the racial dynamics and tensions surfaced by the 2020 murder of African American George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin. Jones and Rogers (2023) do so by considering themes that emerged in their interviews with “black +” young adults via a M(ai)cro Model conceptual framework that explicitly positions macrosystem events as having a direct effect on individual’s everyday experiences and developmental processes. One key theme that emerged from this study is related to the challenges multiracial young adults often experience when relying on their monoracial parents as sources of information about racial dynamics in society. For example, one biracial black + young woman in this study reported that her parents actively prepared her to experience anti-black discrimination, even as she does not believe she has ever personally experienced it. For this respondent, the mismatch between

parental socialization and her own lived experience contributed to her feelings of inauthenticity as a black person. The authors draw on this challenge with feelings of authenticity and other themes raised in their study to point to ways in which multiracial black + Americans can feel excluded from a racial classification system in the United States—one that can simultaneously define as African American any individual with African American ancestry (i.e., the one drop rule), but that can also often exclude from this category individuals without two African American parents.

Finally, Vezaldenos and colleagues (2023) focus explicitly, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, on how monoracial parents in the United States prepare their multiracial children for experiences of racial bias. In so doing, these authors take up the questions of whether parents from more dominant and/or privileged groups who are raising multiracial children with lineage from oppressed groups will struggle to prepare their children for racial bigotry because of their own lack of personal experience with such biases. At the same time, the authors also explore whether the experiences that monoracial parents of color have had with racial bias will be applicable and transferable in the socialization of their multiracial children. In using these questions to analyze interviews with parents leading multiracial households, Vezaldenos and colleagues identify five distinct and important parental approaches to socializing their children about racism and antiracism that fall along a continuum ranging from the denial of the existence of racism, on one hand, to actively engaging children in antiracist reflection and action on behalf of their own and other racial identity groups, on the other. In so doing, these scholars provide critical insights into both opportunities and unique difficulties that parents leading multiracial families face in preparing their children to recognize, resist, and challenge racism in the contemporary United States.

Finally, it is important to note that as guest editors of this special issue, this focus on parenting in multiracial families is both professionally and personally meaningful. We are both parents in multiracial and/or multiethnic families raising multiethnic-racial children. At the same time, neither of us ourselves identify as multiracial, and thus do not bring that repertoire of personal experience, sensitivity, and insight to bear in this editorial work. Our aim then has been to convene this space that will continue elevating the issues themselves, as guided by leading and emerging voices in the field.

In 1958, Gallup reported that just 4% of Americans approved of marriages between black and white people. When Gallup asked this question again in 2021, 94% of Americans reported approving of such interracial relationships and families (McCarthy, 2021). This shift from nearly universal disapproval to nearly universal approval over the past 65 years represents one of the most dramatic swings in

perspective on any issue across all facets of American life. While this change in social beliefs over time is encouraging, we also know that structural, interpersonal, and ideological barriers to the full thriving of multiracial youth remain. It is our hope, then, that both individually and collectively, the six papers in this special issue make a substantive contribution to research that can in turn support helping professionals, other researchers, and families themselves create more just and loving spaces for multiracial youth.

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