



Parental Ethnic-Racial Socialization Practices among Chinese Immigrant Families with Young Children

Xinyi Zhang, M.Ed., Jia Li Liu, Ph.D., Xiaoli Gong, M.A., Cixin Wang, Ph.D.



Introduction

- Asian American children, despite high educational achievement, report more peer and adult racial discrimination compared to their non-Asian peers (Greene et al., 2006; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004)
- Racial discrimination experiences predict greater anxiety, depressive symptoms, and lower self-esteem among Asian American children (Benner & Kim, 2009; Juang & Alvarez, 2010; Juang & Cookston, 2009)
- Ethnic-Racial Socialization is protective against racial discrimination.
- Little is known about ethnic-racial socialization processes in early childhood among Asian American families.

Ethnic-Racial Socialization

Ethnic-Racial Socialization (ERS) are “the mechanisms through which parents transmit information, values, and perspectives about ethnicity and race to their children” (Hughes et al., 2006, p. 747). Researchers first documented ERS in African American families where African American parents instilled racial pride in their children to prepare them for racial discrimination in the society (Richardson, 1982; Tatum, 1987). More recently, researchers found that ERS is also prevalent in other ethnic minority families.

There are **four dimensions** of ethnic-racial socialization (Hughes, 2006):

Cultural Socialization (CS)

CS is teaching children about their racial or ethnic heritage and history and promoting cultural, racial, and ethnic pride, either directly or indirectly. CS was the most used theme and was found to be consistently associated with positive outcomes for children of color from previous studies.



Promotion of Mistrust (PM)

PM refers to practices that emphasize the need for wariness and distrust in interracial interactions. Previous studies have found that PM was negatively associated with students’ academic outcomes, self-esteem and prosocial behaviors (Huguley et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020).



Preparation for Bias (PB)

PB is teaching children to anticipate discrimination and preparing them to cope with it. Researchers found mixed outcomes associated with Preparation for bias. PB had some effects in helping youths understand and cope with discrimination, however these relationships were weak (Hughes et al., 2006). Adolescents of color that anticipated discrimination showed more depressive symptoms and conflicts with their parents (Rumbaut, 1994).



Egalitarianism and Silence about Race (ES)

Egalitarianism is teaching children to value individual qualities over racial group membership. Silence about race is avoiding mention of race in discussion with their children. Literature about this dimension is scarce (Yasui, 2015). The existing literature have shown that for children of color, ES was associated with suboptimal outcomes (Hughes et al., 2006; Huguley et al., 2019).



Current Study

Aim: This qualitative study examines parental ERS processes among Chinese immigrant families with young children between 4-7 years old.

Hypothesis: Given the exploratory nature of this study, no initial hypothesis was proposed.

Participants: 40 Chinese American mothers (Mage = 37.10; SDage = 5.41) of young children (Mage = 5.73; SDage = 0.78, female n=21, 52.5%) from Maryland and New York participated in semi-structured interviews about their ethnic-racial socialization practices.

Measures: We adapted interview questions from the Ethnic-Racial Socialization Scale (Hughes & Chen, 1997).

Questions about each ERS dimension:

After explaining what each dimension means, the interviewer asked the participant:

- Frequency of using ERS practices:** *Do you often, sometimes, seldom/rarely, or never use Cultural socialization/ Preparation for Bias/ Promotion of Mistrust/ Egalitarianism and Silence about Race?*
- Perceived benefits and harm of ERS:** *How are these methods helpful and/or potentially harmful?*
- Changes in using ERS as their child develops:** *Would your responses change based on your child’s age? In what ways?*

Analysis: Transcripts were coded in Dedoose using content and thematic analyses.

Content Analysis Results

Cultural Socialization (CS)

- CS practices were frequently used, most often through eating Chinese food (n=19), celebrating holidays (n=15), and speaking the Chinese language (n=14).
- CS was viewed favorably and believed to help children understand Chinese history, culture and language, and promote cultural pride/identity.
- Parents desired to maintain or increase the frequency of CS practices as children age but noted barriers such as increased peer influence.



Promotion of Mistrust (PM)

- The majority of participants (n=30) have never utilized PM messages.
- There were mixed views about PM messages. Fourteen mothers believed that it is not conducive to fostering positive intergroup relations. Eleven mothers believed that it could protect their children from future danger.
- It was not clear how mothers would change their use of PM messages. Six mothers mentioned that they would tailor PM messages to their child’s developmental level.

Preparation for Bias (PB)

- PB was used less frequently than CS. One mother used it often and 23 mothers never used it.
- There were mixed views about PB messages. Sixteen mothers disclosed that PB was helpful for teaching children strategies to manage prejudice and discrimination. Some mothers feared that PB set pre-conceived notions about race (n=10) and negatively affected children’s mental health (n=15).
- There was not a consistent trend on how these mothers would change their use of PB. Seven mothers noted that the frequency would be determined by their child.

Egalitarianism and Silence about Race (ES)

- The frequency of ES had the least consensus among participants. Slightly more than half of the mothers used it sometimes (n=14) and rarely (n=9).
- Participants shared mixed views about ES. Twenty-four mothers viewed ES as beneficial for promoting mutual understanding, diversity, and cooperation. On the other hand, nineteen individuals viewed ES messages as harmful as they neglect the reality of racism and negate the value of diversity.
- As children mature, parents saw themselves using same or fewer ES messages (n=21) and having more complex conversations about race/racism (n=8).

Thematic Analysis Results

Cultural Socialization messages were desirable and were used favorably

“There are many Chinese historical figures, which are very interesting in my opinion. My husband wanted to buy “Journey to the West” [a Chinese book] to show her, letting her know about interesting Chinese culture. Ask her to speak Chinese more often at home.” ----a 37-year-old mother from Maryland, with a 5-year-old daughter

Participants expressed mixed views about Preparation for Bias messages

“I think there are pros and cons, and some children will work hard (after parents tell them because they are ethnic minorities, they must double their hard work), but she may eventually have a little inferiority [complex] deep in her heart and feel that she is [just] Asian.” ----a 32-year-old mother from New York, with a 6-year-old son

Participants viewed Promotion of Mistrust messages as reinforcing stereotypes and hurting cross-racial relationships

“That sounds terrible, and definitely makes me think this one is no. I think it also may build racism.” ----a 32-year-old mother from Maryland, with a 6-year-old daughter

“It’s just introducing mistrust in the society because based on the background of the people, the race/ethnicity of the people, and nobody wants to live in a society like that.” ----a 39-year-old mother from Maryland, with a 5-year-old daughter

Participants hoped for deeper conversations about race as their children mature

“It’ll be even more conversations because now they (are too young and) don’t understand ... I think it’s important to talk about that, and all other minorities, so less silence about race and more conversations. I definitely see that change, or I’m hoping it will change.” ----a 32-year-old mother from Maryland, with a 6-year-old daughter

Discussion and Implications

- To our knowledge, this is the first study using a developmental lens to examine ethnic-racial socialization processes among Asian American families with young children.
- Ethnic-racial socialization processes are common in Chinese American families’ daily routines. Parents have mixed feelings about race talk and hope for more in-depth conversations about race with their children.
- As American schools become more racially and ethnically diverse, psychologists and educators need to learn more about the needs of Asian American families. Educators and clinicians have a critical role in protecting Asian American children from racial discrimination and in helping families address colorblind rhetoric.