Barriers and Bridges to Positive Cross-Ethnic Relations: African American and White Parent Socialization Beliefs and Practices

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What is This?
BARRIERS AND BRIDGES TO POSITIVE CROSS-ETHNIC RELATIONS
African American and White Parent Socialization Beliefs and Practices

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African American and White parents who expressed interest in their youth’s cross-ethnic peer relations discussed barriers that contributed to cross-ethnic avoidance and their efforts to bridge those barriers in their youth. African American parents routinely used discussion, efforts to create positive contact situations, modeling, and explicit statements in response to their perception that cross-ethnic relations were stymied by discrimination and a lack of grounding in African American culture. White parents relied primarily on the school and inaction to overcome barriers of an ethnically homogeneous social context, socioeconomic status differences, and a lack of understanding of African American culture. Parents’ socialization efforts appeared to occur in response to parents’ position as members of cultural and numerical majority versus minority groups and were further responsive to formal and informal practices of the school and peer group influences.

Since the Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) Supreme Court ruling, public schools have been challenged with the social mission of disrupting the patterns of ethnic avoidance that characterize American

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society. Qualitative and quantitative researchers, focusing primarily on African American and White youth, portray vastly different images of adolescents’ cross-ethnic relations, ranging from interethnic peace and high rates of friendships to animosity across ethnic groups (Peshkin, 1991; Schofield, 1989; Shrum, Cheek, & Hunter, 1988). An understanding of the forces that shape adolescents’ cross-ethnic relations is important as avoidant or negative relations are implicated in less than optimal school adjustment, including poor academic achievement, low self-esteem, and minimal involvement in academic and extracurricular activities (Clark, 1991; Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991; Schofield, 1989). In the longer term, positive interethnic relations are essential for individuals’ psychological well-being as well as for social and economic equality among members of all cultural groups (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993).

The preponderance of research on the effect of instructional practices, multicultural curricula, and other social-structural features would lead one to believe that the school is the primary socializing influence on youth’s cross-ethnic relations. Yet research findings repeatedly indicate that the school does not act independently of other contexts in shaping students’ adjustment. Phelan and colleagues (Phelan et al., 1991) proposed that research on school adjustment must consider youth’s integration of competing and complementary socializing messages not only from the school context but also from those originating in and reinforced by the family and the peer group. Although a large body of research credits parents as a primary influence on youth’s peer relations (e.g., Parke & Ladd, 1992), we know surprisingly little about parental socialization when peers are from a different ethnic group. In this investigation, focus group and individual interviews provide insight into the family context supporting African American and White students’ positive cross-ethnic peer relations. During these interviews, a range of parents’ beliefs and practices emerged. Furthermore, a complex relationship between parents’ beliefs and practices and those of the public schools and peer group was revealed.
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON PARENTAL SOCIALIZATION OF RACE AND ETHNIC RELATIONS

Different conceptualizations of individuals’ psychological adjustment in culturally diverse societies point to a range of perspectives that parents might maintain with respect to cross-ethnic peer relations for their children. Parents may subscribe to what many argue to be the dominant narrative on race and ethnic relations in American society, a colorblind view. This perspective reflects American democratic philosophy in which individuality rather than ethnic group membership is emphasized. Paying attention to ethnicity as a factor in rewards and benefits is viewed as illegitimate and indeed, prejudiced (Omi & Winant, 1986; Rist, 1974). With respect to ethnic relations, a colorblind perspective translates into a belief that ethnicity is not a legitimate factor in relationship formation (Schofield, 1986).

Competing viewpoints are assimilation and acculturation perspectives, both of which would encourage relationships with cross-ethnic peers to the exclusion of same-ethnic peers (LaFromboise et al., 1993)—because parents are more comfortable with the second culture than with their primary culture or because they perceive that cross-ethnic relationships are integral to their children’s success. Alternatively, parents may maintain bicultural orientations in which distinctions between different cultures are recognized but are not viewed as insurmountable barriers. Both same- and cross-ethnic relationships are valued because they ground individuals in their own and other cultural groups, thereby providing social support (LaFromboise et al., 1993). Finally, a contrasting view to acceptance or encouragement of cross-ethnic relations is separation, or avoidance of relationships with cross-ethnic peers in favor of relationships exclusively with members of one’s own group. This perspective is concomitant with a lack of interest in and knowledge about the other culture, low regard toward members of the second culture, and beliefs that different cultural groups are essentially incompatible (LaFromboise et al., 1993).

The specific objectives that parents maintain for their children’s cross-ethnic peer relations—and their communication of their objectives—are intricately tied to socioecological demands and opportunities in the parenting context. Parents’ socialization objectives and practices are shaped by historical and societal forces as well as by features of the immediate community, school, and neighborhood context in which
families reside (Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990). In other words, African American and White parents are likely to approach the socialization of cross-ethnic relations from distinctly different starting points and in distinctly different ways, even if living in the same community and within a society that strives to downplay the significance of race and ethnic group membership.

African American parent socialization of cross-ethnic peer relations. Despite colorblind discourse popular in larger society, African American parents cannot ignore the reality that ethnic group membership is a factor in their children’s peer relations. Belonging to an ethnic minority group imposes unique demands for adjustment, including being able to relate positively to members of the culturally defining majority group (LaFromboise et al., 1993). Furthermore, by virtue of numerical minority status, African American children often find themselves in schools in which their pool of potential friends consists primarily of White peers (Clark, 1989). Thus, many African American parents must respond both to a societal press to raise their children to be competent in mainstream society as members of a devalued minority group as well as to demands in their immediate environment to help their children forge healthy relations with specific White peers.

Within this context, empirical study of African American parents’ racial and ethnic socialization finds support for multiple perspectives regarding cross-ethnic relations for youth. For instance, consistent with a colorblind view, many of the urban and poor African American parents interviewed by Fordham (1997) denied or deemphasized the significance of race and ethnicity in daily experience, including interactions with White Americans, when raising their youth. Yet Fordham observed that these youth witnessed their parents’ circumstances and daily struggles with discrimination and relationships with White Americans and thus received mixed messages from parents about relating to White Americans. In other studies, researchers find socialization suggestive of bicultural, assimilation, and acculturation orientations. For instance, some African American parents advocate friendships with White peers as a means to be well adjusted in a culturally diverse society, cope with discrimination, and advance in mainstream society (Peshkin, 1991; Phinney & Chavira, 1995; Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990).
Ogbu’s (1991) cultural ecological theory cautions that separation may have a competing presence in parents’ socialization. According to this view, historical inequity and oppression experienced by African Americans at the hand of White Americans has led to a deep distrust of White Americans and the institutions they control, such as schools. An adaptation in response to discrimination and subjugation has been to form an oppositional identity that necessitates avoidance of behaviors and attitudes that are construed as acting White (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Although Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) study, conducted in an almost exclusively African American school, did not identify having White friends as acting White, it is consistent with their thesis and observations that such behavior would be perceived as a significant sellout among African American youth. A few studies have suggested that avoidance of relationships with White Americans may have roots in parental socialization; for instance, focus group interviews with an economically and occupationally diverse group of African American parents led Hughes and Chen (1997) to identify “promotion of social distance and wariness toward White Americans” (p. 207) as a major theme in ethnic socialization. However, subsequent analyses led the authors to conclude that this perspective was infrequently maintained among African American parents.

This small collection of studies suggests that helping their children to manage relations with cross-ethnic, particularly White peers, permeates African American parents’ socialization efforts. Yet an understanding of the family context of African American youth’s cross-ethnic peer relations is limited because parents have not been asked to comment directly on the objectives they have for their youth’s cross-ethnic peer relations or the means by which they communicate these objectives. Moreover, researchers on the whole have not looked beyond historical and societal forces to understand how parents’ socialization is shaped by demands that arise within neighborhoods, schools, and communities. In the few studies available, Thornton et al. (1990) found that racial- and ethnic-related socialization was greater among African American parents living in neighborhoods with low compared to moderate or high proportions of African Americans. Tatum (1987), too, discussed how African American parents responded with increased racial and ethnic socialization when they relocated their families from communities with substantial proportions of
African Americans to a predominantly White community. In one study more specifically focused on the content of parents’ socialization and its relation to context, African American parents were more likely to promote social distance from and wariness of Whites when they perceived greater institutional racism in the workplace (Hughes & Chen, 1997). The results of these studies suggest that African American parents are sensitive to the contributions of other socializing agents in their children’s lives and respond to circumstances in their families’ immediate environments.

White parental socialization. Very little direct study of White parents’ ethnic-related socialization can be found. This dearth of research is likely symptomatic of White parents’ position of privilege as members of the dominant cultural group. Feminist scholars (e.g., Fine, Weis, Powell, & Wong, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993) suggest that White families’ membership in the culturally defining group has created a historical privilege that obviates the need to address issues of cultural diversity in raising their children. In other words, from this perspective, raising youth to be able to form positive relations with members of minority groups is not likely to be a parenting priority for many White parents.

Furthermore, the specific views about cross-ethnic relations that White parents maintain are likely to reflect their position of privilege. That is, as members of the culturally defining group, White parents are unlikely to maintain assimilation or acculturation objectives for their children; more likely are colorblind views that minority group members should conform to or assimilate to mainstream values and behaviors (Lambert & Taylor, 1988). In an ethnographic study of a community with fairly equal proportions of White and ethnic minority families, Peshkin (1991) observed that many White parents were largely indifferent to the ethnic background of their children’s acquaintances and friends. Other parents in this community actively attempted to thwart cross-ethnic relations; some families had moved from the community to remove the possibility of cross-ethnic contact. Yet Peshkin also observed that as White adults gradually acceded to the ethnic diversity of the community’s residents, they increasingly saw the value of both same- and cross-ethnic peer relations for their youth. However, the extent to which and ways in which parents com-
municated such perspectives have not received direct attention. Furthermore, contextual triggers of White parents’ socialization related to their youth’s cross-ethnic relations remain unclear. Particular contexts in which White families are situated, such as predominantly White communities, may heighten White parents’ privilege to overlook cross-ethnic peer relations in their socialization efforts. That is, when White parents are acting from positions of societal as well as numerical majority status, helping their children to be able to form positive cross-ethnic relationships is likely to assume a low priority as a topic of socialization. Yet it is difficult to draw conclusions about White parents’ socialization given the lack of attention granted to these issues.

COMPONENTS OF SOCIALIZATION TO CONSIDER

Models of parental socialization indicate that although parents’ objectives for their youth’s cross-ethnic relations are important, parents’ actual influence on their youth comes through specific vehicles such as modeling, discussions, actions, and explicit statements (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). Several studies hint that African American parents use discussion as a means to help their youth understand issues related to being African American in the United States (Peshkin, 1991; Phinney & Chavira, 1995; Thornton et al., 1990). Boykin (1986) pointed out that the daily fabric of parents’ lives, such as parents’ own interactions with members of other ethnic groups, sends youth powerful messages about the feasibility of cross-ethnic relations and effective or ineffective strategies for positive interaction. In one study, the ethnic diversity of children’s social networks mirrored the ethnic diversity of the mothers’ network; the most striking homogeneity occurred among White children in two-parent homes who, similar to their mothers, reported essentially no African American social contacts (Cochran & Riley, 1990). Ogbu (1991) reminded us, however, that parents’ socialization practices sometimes belie their objectives; furthermore, parents’ practices may send inconsistent messages to youth about relationships with cross-ethnic peers (Fordham, 1997). Thus, it is important to consider the range and nature of messages in relation to parental viewpoints that parents communicate about cross-ethnic relations.
THE CURRENT STUDY

This article describes how African American parents of lower and middle socioeconomic status (SES) and White parents of middle SES in a predominantly White community socialized their youth’s cross-ethnic peer relations. Parents discussed their objectives regarding cross-ethnic relations and described the actions—and sometimes inaction—they took to help their youth forge positive cross-ethnic relations. In the process, these interviews revealed how parents’ efforts occurred in reaction to other socializing agents such as the school and the peer group.

The sources of data for this study were focus group and individual interviews with African American and White parents. Focus group methodology was chosen as the primary tool to capture the language and concepts that African American and White parents use to think about and talk about their youth’s cross-ethnic relations. Homogeneity of group members within focus groups facilitates self-disclosure about experiences and perspectives and aids in identification of common elements in members’ perspectives. At the same time, the informal dialogue that ensues among group members, compared with the more formal exchange characteristic of individual interview methodology, can lead to disagreement and discrepancy in beliefs that force participants to clarify and elaborate on their positions. As a result, a richly textured portrait of the complexities of group members’ perspectives emerges (Hughes & Dumont, 1993; Krueger, 1994). A small number of individual interviews was also conducted with parents to follow up on issues that emerged in the focus groups and in a survey study that followed the focus group study.

SOURCES OF DATA AND CONTEXT OF STUDY

Six focus groups were conducted among a total of 18 African American and 10 White parents. Each focus group was conducted once; each group ranged from 90 to 120 minutes in duration. The study was represented as an effort to understand how parents help their children negotiate cross-ethnic peer relations in their ethnically di-
verse schools. Parents were invited to participate through multiple means. One focus group was assembled through a leader at a local community center and included parents involved in a weekly parenting group at that center. Local parent-teacher-student organizations (PTSOs) were helpful in locating parents for other focus groups. At a school that was currently undergoing busing disputes, the president of the PTSO provided a list of names of parents who, based on parents’ public expression of their views, the PTSO president believed represented a range of beliefs regarding cross-ethnic peer relations. Other school and community leaders offered similar lists of names. Focus groups were filled in by volunteers who responded to a presentation by the researchers at a PTSO meeting. Table 1 presents the composition of each group and provides additional details about participants.

All families resided in a medium-sized Midwestern city that was approximately 85% White and 11% African American. This city was home to institutions of higher education as well as state government and light industry. Although some parents had middle-school-age children as well as multiple children in multiple levels of public schooling, criteria for participation included having at least one child currently enrolled in a local elementary school (fifth grade) or high school. The purpose of this age-related selection criterion was to capture parents’ beliefs and practices prior to and following their children’s entry into adolescence, a transition associated with a decline in positive cross-ethnic relations (e.g., Shrum et al., 1988).

School district data for the year the study was conducted indicated that the racial/ethnic distributions of the particular elementary schools that children attended ranged from 42% African American and 36% White to 16% African American and 66% White. At the high school level, the youth of parent participants attended either a school that had a 12% African American and 84% White student body or a school that had a 13% African American and 74% White student body. The particular schools, neighborhoods, and community centers were chosen because of the ethnic diversity in the youth population. Other schools in the district, from which families were not recruited, reported comparatively small or negligible proportions of ethnic minority youth. The community and certain schools in particular had experienced a relatively recent influx of African American school-age youth; for instance, school district data indicated that in one of the high schools
TABLE 1
Summary Characteristics of Focus Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group (number of parents)</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (11)</td>
<td>African American parents who were members of a parent group at a community center serving a lower-income, predominantly African American neighborhood. Many but not all parents had completed a high school degree. Many parents reported receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Parents were from the Midwest and South.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (4)</td>
<td>White parents from middle-socioeconomic-status (SES) backgrounds, from urban Midwestern cities, or small predominantly White Midwestern communities. All parents held a 4-year college degree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (3)</td>
<td>African American and White parents from middle-SES backgrounds, although 2 participants reported that they had grown up in working-class families. All parents had a minimum of a college degree; 2 held master’s degrees. All were currently members of interracial families by marriage or adoption. All members had lived in other regions of the United States, including New England, other Midwestern cities, and the South.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (3)</td>
<td>White parents from middle- and upper-SES backgrounds. One was employed full-time, others were full-time homemakers and actively involved in the public high schools. All parents held a college degree. Parents had lived in the study city and in other regions of the country, including the South.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (4)</td>
<td>African American parents from working- and middle-SES backgrounds. Two parents were in the process of completing community college degrees; 1 held a high school degree. All parents were employed; 1 parent was a school employee. Parents were from the study city and the South.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (3)</td>
<td>African American parents from middle- and upper-SES backgrounds. All 3 held a college degree; 2 held advanced professional degrees. One was employed in a race-related profession. Two had lived in multiple areas of the United States.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

from which respondents were drawn, the proportion of African American students had more than doubled, from 5% of the student body to 12% of the student body, over the previous 5 years.

A total of 11 parents were also interviewed individually to further develop issues that emerged in the focus groups. These parents had not participated in the focus groups; each parent had participated in a quantitative study that followed the initial focus group study. Six White mothers, all from middle-class backgrounds, were interviewed. One mother worked full-time in a school-related position; two worked full-time in a non-school-related profession; the other three worked part-time out of their homes. Two of the mothers had moved to the study city from other urban areas in part, in their description, to avoid
raising their youth in a city in which they feared their youth would develop negative attitudes toward African Americans. Other mothers were natives of the study city. Five African American parents also participated in follow-up, individual interviews. Three of the African American parents, a father and two mothers, were from working-class backgrounds, although one mother was completing an associate’s degree at the time she was interviewed. The other two African American mothers had completed advanced degrees and were employed in professional positions.

Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted in various locations at the discretion of participants based on issues of convenience and comfort. Participants were offered multiple options for the setting of focus groups; one was conducted at the community center that served the neighborhood of parent participants, one took place after school hours in a local middle school library, and four were held in a pleasant office in a university building. All individual interviews were completed in participants’ homes at the request of each participant. Two female interviewers, both graduate students in their 20s, one White (the author) and one African American, shared the responsibility of moderating the focus groups. Individual interviews with African American parents were conducted by the African American interviewer; those involving White parents were conducted by the White interviewer. In each focus group, one or more participants offered unsolicited comments that suggested that it was appropriate for this study to be conducted by White and African American researchers in collaboration. The presence of the African American interviewer appeared to lend credibility to the study but also provided the author an opportunity to reflect on and clarify interpretations and impressions with an individual who had experienced the same interview and who had a similar ethnic background to many study participants.

To most accurately capture the multiple voices and language of the focus groups and interviews, all interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim by the author.

CODING

Prior to completion of the first focus group interview, preliminary codes were established based on the research literature (e.g., codes for
practices such as modeling). The rudimentary coding schemes suggested by parents’ responses changed throughout the initial process of analysis and formed the basis of the coding system that was ultimately used for analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1984). After completion of the focus groups and individual interviews, a three-step process of content analysis was used. First, each transcript was read in its entirety, and analytic files were created that reflected central ideas (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). The second phase, begun after the majority of interviews were completed, involved initial comparisons of themes primarily within and across ethnic and SES groups (Miles & Huberman, 1984). In the third step of the content analysis, codes were integrated and themes were described and interpreted (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Specific quotations were taken verbatim from transcripts to illustrate themes. With recognition that these quotations were several iterations of analysis away from their original voices, I returned to the original transcript to ensure that the quotation as used to illustrate a theme was not taken out of context of the original dialogue.

The themes discussed are not comprehensive of all the material generated by the focus groups.

**AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS**

**OBJECTIVES FOR CROSS-ETHNIC RELATIONSHIPS**

Socializing youth to have positive relationships with White peers appeared to be a pressing issue to the African American parent participants, particularly in light of the fact that their youth represented a numerical minority in the community and schools. In discussing their perspectives on their youth’s peer relations, most African American parent participants ardently maintained that ethnicity “did not make the person” and that ethnic group membership was not a legitimate basis for forming, dissolving, or avoiding relationships. The comments of some parents seemed clearly aligned with a colorblind ideal. Two parents launched the first focus group with this dialogue:

P1: I think that if a parent prepares their child to deal with somebody of a different color, it’s prejudiced.
P2: That’s right.
P1: That’s my opinion.
P2: I agree with that. . . . I just said, “Go out and have fun. And if they treat you differently, if they don’t treat you with respect, that’s not the type of person you want to be with.” I did not say anything about race, color . . . and my kids are respectful to everybody and they have friends from all different backgrounds. (FG1)

Some parents qualified these colorblind themes with views that also appeared to be consistent with a bicultural stance. These parents asserted that although race and ethnicity should not be factors in relationship development, their youth should and could maintain relationships with African American peers as well as with peers from other cultural groups such as White Americans, with whom they had regular contact. For instance, one father, who also seemed to be a proponent of views consistent with a colorblind perspective noted, “I want to encourage her to have friends in all sorts of situations, socioeconomically, socially, and racially. I feel it has been a tremendous advantage for me to be able to just relate to anybody” (FG3).

Regardless of whether their objectives appeared more strongly resonant with a colorblind or bicultural view, most parent participants noted that their youth’s relationships often fell short of parents’ ideals. That is, many parents observed increasing avoidance of White peers as their youth entered adolescence, a trend well documented in the transition from childhood to adolescence (e.g., Shrum et al., 1988). One mother of a high school student reported:

[Last year, son] kicked the White kids to the curb for sure! . . . So this year, I was really glad to see this [friendship with White boy] started back up. They’re really nice kids. I’m sure that a lot of it was him maturing and realizing the importance of friendships, and that it doesn’t really matter if your friends are White or Black, as long as they’re somebody that you can count on and that they can count on you. (FG6)

Most parents expressed displeasure if their youth summarily dismissed peers because they were not African American, especially when previous friendships were dissolved. Parents attributed increasing avoidance of White peers to a sense of disenfranchisement as a mi-
nority group member perpetuated by the school and the media and to discriminatory treatment their youth received from White peers, school personnel, and other adults. Furthermore, although parents in the current study did not by their own reports encourage their youth to avoid relationships with White peers, they noted counterpressures to avoid White peers coming from African American peers. For many parents, a significant aspect of their socialization involved subverting peer socialization:

He gets harassed a whole lot because they call him a honkey lover. I told him it doesn’t matter the color of the skin. Those boys are just jealous because maybe they’re not being accepted by these other [White] kids. . . . I tell him, “Don’t worry about the pressure . . . you just keep yourself clean.” (FG5)

Despite such barriers, many parents asserted that their youth could be equipped with tools that would permit them to maintain positive cross-ethnic relations. Parents openly discussed how they sought to instill important skills and understandings in their youth to bridge the barriers they identified.

BARRIERS AND BRIDGES TO POSITIVE CROSS-ETHNIC RELATIONS

*Coping with discrimination.* African American parents anticipated that their children would experience differential treatment that would make it difficult to forge and maintain positive relationships with White peers. Consistent with Ogbu’s (1991; Ogbu & Simons, 1998) thesis, parents appeared to be particularly suspicious of the school’s ability to promote positive cross-ethnic relations; parents discussed various academic and extracurricular situations that polarized African American and White youth. For instance, one mother described her perception of her daughter’s efforts to join the all-White cheerleading team:

Well she went out for tryouts. She was supposed to be doing those . . . cheers. They refused to give her papers with the cheers on them so she didn’t know the cheers. They had practices when she didn’t
know that there was gonna be practices and then when she did catch up with them for practice they wanted to treat her like she was an outsider. (FG1)

Two discrepant perspectives were apparent regarding how this barrier should be addressed. One perspective maintained that it was inappropriate to prepare youth to anticipate experiencing discrimination. One mother explained:

I think it’s really important that people develop as individuals. When you talk about things, kids listen and they’re intrigued by what adults talk about. They start to form this kind of preconceived notion that I’m never gonna be treated right, and this is the way that all Black people are treated. And I don’t think that’s right. I think that’s part of the problem in the decline in race relations between Whites and Blacks.

Parents who expressed this belief contended that a healthy sense of self-respect and self-esteem were the appropriate tools for pursuing positive relationships with White peers despite a discriminatory climate. Parents described themselves as quite explicit in proactively assuring their youth of their self-worth, emphasizing self-esteem and self-respect “from day one.” As several parents observed, they actively modeled this message as well: “You teach them by treating them with respect and demand it back. As a Black woman, I’m going to demand my respect. That’s what I do with my kids” (FG5). Parents also noted that their reinforcement of their youth’s sense of self occurred not only proactively but in reaction to specific events at the school or in the community. The same mother who described her daughter’s cheerleading experiences explained how she helped her daughter cope with that experience and maintain her existing White friends:

Those kids [White girls] treated her like she was less. . . . I won’t have her thinking that. Because she ain’t no less than them. She ain’t no more. But like I tell her, if you don’t think that you’re something, nobody else is not going to think nothing of you. (FG1)

Parents of a different perspective focused less on the role of self-esteem and instead emphasized the need to overtly prepare youth to cope with racism and discrimination. A father of an elementary
school child explained: “I take the same tact that my mother took in that we were prepared for the worst, if we ever got into a situation going out there. I want my daughter to have the same sort of insight” (FG3).

Parents maintaining this perspective described their efforts to help their children accurately analyze potentially discriminatory circumstances with White individuals and to engender strategies for coping with discrimination while still persevering in positive relationships with individual White peers. In pursuit of this objective, parents encouraged youth to discuss their own and peers’ experiences; parents also shared their own positive and negative experiences and responded to media images to broaden their youth’s perspectives. One common parenting practice involved discussing real or fictitious situations that could be interpreted as discriminatory. Parents acted as facilitators, helping their children to identify options and to recognize appropriate times to use those options. An African American mother depicted the workings of this practice:

By taking him through a series of questions. I have him describe what it is, or I might describe a scenario. And then based on that I’ll say, “Now you need to ask yourself this question, this question. Look for these signs. Just kind of process it.” . . . Sometimes it is in reaction to something. Sometimes it’s just part of our discussion. We might watch TV together and something might come on there. . . . If you have something that’s more concrete or something that a teenager can relate to in terms of a life experience, it’s easier to explain what an appropriate response might be by helping them to know what they need to think about in that transaction. (FG6)

Parents further discussed their efforts to proactively instill in children tools for thinking critically about contemporary ethnic relations by situating the experience of discrimination into a larger historical or global context. One father elaborated on this effort:

Around the world you can go, we always find reason to fight or distinguish yourself from somebody. You can use the news that way. I say, “Well, come back to this country. This is what was happening in 1950, this is what was happening in different eras, with slavery and so forth.” It just puts it into a different sort of perspective. (FG3)
Parents also highlighted the effect of their own handling of discriminatory experiences. A mother in Focus Group 6 commented, “That’s why I think sometimes [son] is more tuned in to when he’s being treated differently. Because it’s something I think he’s seen me pay attention to and talk about.”

**Responding to disenfranchisement.** In addition to discrimination, many African American parents identified a sense of alienation and disenfranchisement as a barrier to positive relationships with White peers. These parents discussed their perception of youth’s social alienation from both African American and White peers in relation to the school’s lack of inclusive curricula and proportionately large White student body:

Because of the way that the school system is set up, it does not promote that individual’s culture. You see them wandering around, not feeling a part. . . . Once you have that interaction with your own culture, and you can get some strength with that, then you can branch out to kind of embrace some other cultures. (FG5)

Parents described their efforts to accomplish this objective, citing exposure to African American literature and art and emphasizing the continued contributions of African American scholars. Most parent participants also encouraged their youth to participate in the African American cultural groups led by African American mentors and offered as an extracurricular event by the schools.

**Significance of parents’ own relationships.** Finally, regardless of the orientation that parents appeared to maintain toward their youth’s cross-ethnic peer relations (e.g., colorblind and bicultural), all parents agreed that the most powerful messages they communicated to their youth with respect to relationships with Whites were through their own relationships with White friends. As one parent commented: “See, they [children] see me working and interacting with other people of different races, they say, ‘Oh, it’s OK’” (FG5). Parents noted that their friendships with White adults sent the message that having positive relationships with White Americans was part of normal, daily functioning. Parents’ relationships modeled efficacious ways of inter-
acting with White Americans and had the potential to introduce their youth to the children of their friends.

**SUMMARY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENT SOCIALIZATION**

Membership in a social minority group as well as experiencing numerical ethnic minority status in this community conspired to make socialization of cross-ethnic peer relations a point of necessity to African American parents. The pool of potential friends for their youth was largely White; if parents did not help their children to cross ethnic barriers in their relationships, their children risked not having friends who shared mutual interests or risked losing what parents described to be rewarding relationships. Furthermore, parents noted an intricate relationship between their children’s experiences with White peers and adults and school adjustment. Parent participants discussed the following three specific barriers to forging and maintaining relationships with White peers: a discriminatory social climate, disenfranchisement of African Americans, and discouragement from African American peers. Parents described themselves as actively engaged in helping their youth overcome these barriers through their daily and overt efforts to promote a positive sense of self as a member of a minority and distinct cultural group, their discussions of various strategies to respond to discrimination, and their modeling of positive relationships with White adults. African American parents’ socialization efforts appeared to be triggered not only by their anticipation that their youth would experience problematic relationships with White peers but also by specific events occurring at school and within the African American peer group.

**WHITE PARENTS**

**OBJECTIVES FOR CROSS-ETHNIC RELATIONSHIPS**

On the whole, White parent participants more enthusiastically endorsed cross-ethnic contact and exposure than the development of actual cross-ethnic relationships for their youth. Much of their satisfac-
tion with contact and exposure seemed to stem from their own limited experiences with individuals from other cultural backgrounds; for example, one participant said, “Just the fact that [child] is in school and exposed to kids of different backgrounds is completely different from my experience in school. I always heard about these other people, and she is friends with them” (FG2).

White parent participants typically expressed ambivalence about the significance of cross-ethnic friendships. The comments of many parents, that ethnicity should assume little importance in youth’s peer relationships, appeared consonant with a colorblind approach. True to this belief, parents expressed discomfort with the idea that individuals might intentionally seek relationships with members of other ethnic groups. A small number of parents, however, did report a desire for an ethnically diverse friendship network for their youth. This dialogue among three parents exemplifies a range of parental opinions expressed in one group:

P3: It’s not important to me that they have a friend of any particular race. I want my kids to have friends!

P2: Yeah, as long as it’s an honest and truthful relationship, that she wouldn’t be trying to get something else out of it. . . . I guess it would be nice for her to develop some friendships with kids from other backgrounds, but is it important? I don’t know.

P1: [Wife] and I both actually think it would be kind of neat if he had some Black friends, and at one time or another have tried to gently encourage what we saw as potential friendships. (FG2)

Regardless of viewpoint, however, most White parent participants reported pronounced ethnic segregation in their youth’s relationships. Parents of adolescents noted an avoidance of African American peers during middle school; many parents of elementary school youth expected increased avoidance as their youth entered adolescence. Despite lamenting the loss of what parents perceived to be good relationships, few parents found it appropriate to intervene, as this parent noted:

At [elementary school] he really got to know [African American peer]. I was asking about him his freshman year, and . . . after a while [son]
said, “I don’t see him anymore.” I really felt bad because they really did have a good friendship, they really liked each other, they did a lot of things together. . . . The schools can’t make this happen, parents can’t. The kids have to be the ones.

**BARRIERS AND BRIDGES TO POSITIVE CROSS-ETHNIC RELATIONS**

A goal expressed by the majority of White parents participating in the study was for their youth to have, at minimum, contact with peers from a different ethnic group. Yet parents reported that their youth did not develop cross-ethnic relationships, let alone experience regular contact. Parents identified three specific barriers they perceived to contribute to their youth’s avoidance of cross-ethnic peers and discussed their efforts to help their youth bridge these barriers.

*Ethnic homogeneity of experiences.* Many White parents, particularly of high school youth, recognized that their children’s daily experiences were ethnically segregated. One mother recounted a story about how African American students historically had chosen lockers on the first floor while the majority of White students had chosen lockers on the remaining floors, in essence, resegregating themselves. Although the most recent principal had changed the policy to assigned lockers in the hopes of encouraging interaction between African American and White students, this parent observed that the social situation was virtually unchanged for her youngest son who currently attended the school: “When you go over to the school, there are very few integrated groups talking, they are really quite separated” (FG4).

Parents further contended that cross-ethnic relationships were difficult to develop and maintain due to their youth’s limited contact with ethnic minority youth outside of school. In particular, parents identified the neighborhood and leisure activities, especially sports, as potential contexts for cross-ethnic contact and relationship development. One mother observed:

Where I see my son picking up most of his friends are in sports activities. . . . But what I see that concerns me is that within these sports groups there’s such a segregation. Like the soccer team that my son plays on, there are no Black kids. (FG4)
Parents further noted that the diversity of their own social networks might hold the potential to increase the ethnic diversity of their children’s relationships. However, few parents participating in the current investigation reported contact or friendships with African Americans:

P1: You’re judged by what you do. I don’t relate to all that many people from other racial backgrounds. Although there are a few, I try not to play it up too much. I try to just make it part of my life. But I think that says a lot, who our friends are.

P2: Yeah, right. We’ve never had a regular set of Black friends, individual, couple, whatever, who show up at our house. (FG2)

White parents’ discussions in all groups were reminiscent of Frankenberg’s (1993) observation that the ethnic patterning of childhood environments sends important messages about being White in America. Segregation in the public schools, neighborhoods, and extracurricular activities enables and encourages youth to live a mostly segregated life. Given that (a) parents readily acknowledged the predominantly White social landscape surrounding their children, (b) many expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of ethnic diversity of their children’s experiences, and (c) parents valued, at minimum, cross-ethnic contact for their youth, they were asked to elaborate on the socialization practices they used to respond to this segregation.

With few exceptions, White parents rarely assumed direct responsibility for broadening or facilitating cross-ethnic contact. Some parents asserted that sending their youth to a desegregated school was intentional and constituted their contribution. One parent stated, “I think just the decision to send our kids to public schools in which there are kids from different backgrounds, that in itself says something.” Parents maintaining this perspective expressed that the responsibility to promote cross-ethnic peer relations fell among the auspices of the school. Parents who took this socialization stance also tended to report satisfaction with cross-ethnic contact rather than with the development of actual cross-ethnic relationships for their youth.

Other parents, particularly those who desired an ethnically diverse social network for their youth, discussed efforts the schools had made or could make to improve relations, including more cooperative learning activities, intramural sports, or an open forum to discuss ethnic-
related issues among high school students. Yet few parents actively facilitated existing school efforts to promote positive relations. One parent described her involvement in and perceptions of such efforts:

Like this weekend, there was [school event]. I went; there were maybe eight Whites there. My son went with me, and we talked about it afterwards, because he didn’t really go up to kids to talk with them. . . . Even though it was a school event it turned out to be a very Black event. But I think that would have been a great opportunity to mix people up a little bit more, to get to know one another. (FG4)

Consistent with their deferral to the schools to promote cross-ethnic contact and relationships, few parents, including those who most strongly expressed a desire for their youth to have African American friends, reported efforts to seek ethnically diverse activities for their youth. The small number who had taken steps to broaden regular cross-ethnic contact typically described efforts such as attending ethnically diverse churches or multicultural events. More commonly, parents reported being pleased when an activity unexpectedly included cross-ethnic peers; one parent described special steps taken to extend a cross-ethnic relationship following such an activity:

We’re always hoping. He struck up a friendship with a Black kid in astronomy class. Now he’s on [son’s] football team. I keep saying, “Hey, do you want to invite [child] back? Should we go out for a movie with [child]?” But [son] doesn’t seem very eager. (FG2)

In sum, a common theme in the focus group and individual interviews with White parents addressed the point that the contexts in which children developed relationships were rarely ethnically diverse. Even in ethnically diverse settings, White parents lamented an absence of cross-ethnic interactions and relationship development. Despite these perceptions, White parents rarely assumed responsibility for broadening contact, preferring to defer socialization to other agents such as the school.

*SES as a barrier.* White parent participants identified SES differences between many African American families in the community
and their families as a contributor to the segregation that youth experienced in their neighborhoods and consequently in their activities. In addition, most White parent participants argued that differences in SES led to a lack of mutual interests or common language between their youth and African American peers. In support of their argument that the “problem was social class, not race,” several parents attested to their youth’s apparent acceptance of African American children who had been adopted into middle-SES White families.

Most White parents appeared to be more at ease in discussing their children’s avoidant cross-ethnic relations in terms of SES rather than in terms of ethnic group membership, a likely side effect of the colorblind perspective. Although individuals who espouse a colorblind perspective view ethnic group membership as irrelevant to the ways individuals are treated, lower social class values and behavior are viewed as unacceptable and are considered to be a legitimate basis for judgment (Rist, 1974; Schofield, 1986). Thus, some parents’ socialization practices were not intended to bridge real or perceived differences in SES. Fearing that their youth would adopt what parents perceived to be the behaviors of low-income African American youth, such parents took explicit steps to guarantee that this would not occur:

When [son] was in that [predominantly African American] class, he was using double negatives and that sort of stuff. And I said, “Look, we don’t talk like that.” So right there, if we’re telling them, “You need to speak this way,” and he’s speaking that way to them, they’re not responding because, well, who the heck does he think he is, speaking like that? Well, right there you have a major difference.

Other parents also saw differences in behaviors and language as impediments to their youth’s relations but encouraged their youth to help African American youth conform to middle-class standards of behavior and language. A White mother of a biracial son explained:

He has some nice [African American] friends, but he understands that some Black kids are kind of rough, they don’t listen, they get the other kids in trouble. . . . I always try to tell him, “Don’t take it out on them, it’s their parents who haven’t done a very good job.” Maybe because
they don’t know better or because they don’t have time or whatever. But to try to move them along. In fact, [son’s] teacher tells me that he is kind of a role model for some of the other rougher boys.

Even the parents who most strongly recognized and lamented the significance of SES differences and expressed a desire for their children to have African American friends appeared to find it difficult to help their children transcend SES and ethnic boundaries, as this father’s comment illustrates:

P2: One time we took him over to this one [African American] kid’s house. It unnerved him because it was so different. He could tell that he was in a really different situation, economically if nothing else. He was just very uncomfortable.

Interviewer: How did you deal with that with your son?
P2: We just kind of let it ride.

When the interviewers probed regarding why White parents did not tackle the issue of SES more directly, given the significance that parents appeared to place on this barrier, a common response was that the issue was too complex for children to understand or that children would eventually reach an understanding on their own. For instance, one mother suggested that when her son entered middle school, he would meet more middle-class African American youth and would glean an understanding of SES diversity within ethnic groups from this experience.

Only a small number of parents discussed direct attempts to clarify their youth’s understanding of the complexities of SES and ethnicity; the practice that parents typically employed was discussion:

P1: I’ve got two kids who were in third grade when the integration really started. . . . It was something we had to really work on with them . . . how the economic situation was so different, because they were viewing all Blacks as problem kids. . . . We’d be going places in the car and they’d come with these really racist comments, and we were really shocked, because we don’t talk that way at home, we don’t have those attitudes at home, so we just talked and talked about them.
Interestingly, this parent gave herself little credit for influencing the opinions or behavior of her children, as she offered this response to a question of whether her youngest son had benefited from hearing these discussions prior to his school-based contact with African American peers: “No, I really think he benefited from always being in classes with students of color. Whereas the others [older siblings] were thrown together in third grade.”

Although White parents ardently maintained that their children’s avoidance of African American peers was due to SES, many were at a loss for skills, knowledge, or experiences that would help their children to forge relationships across ethnic and economic lines or were unwilling to permit their children to develop skills or understanding that might facilitate positive relations. In the process, parents did not appear to instill in their youth a means of relating positively to youth who differed in ethnicity as well as SES. The role of SES in cross-ethnic relations is a theme that other researchers have exposed (e.g., Schofield, 1989), but it continues to receive little attention. Parents’ discussions in the current study suggest that White youth receive mixed messages about the acceptability of crossing ethnic boundaries if SES differences are also involved.

Lack of understanding of African American culture. A less pervasive and agreed-on belief that emerged among White parents was that a lack of understanding of African American culture was a barrier to White youth’s relationships with African American peers. This perspective emerged most notably among parents of elementary school youth. These parents reacted to the elementary schools’ prominent multicultural programs, opportunities that parents reported to be largely absent or limited in access at the high school level. This dialogue among White parents of elementary school children captures this viewpoint:

P1: If I understand it correctly, [schools] have to discuss five different kinds of holidays throughout the year. Christmas can be one, Kwanzaa is one, a Jewish holiday, and whatever, Muslim. Those kinds of activities.

Interviewer: How do you see that helps kids relate to one another?
P1: I’m not sure how it helps them relate. Well, certainly they have a little bit better understanding of their backgrounds.

P3: Knowledge! Just learning facts and knowledge that, “Oh, they celebrate this. What do they do?” Knowledge is important, it’s power.

P2: It’s also the basis for understanding someone else.

In general, parents’ comments about this barrier revealed that although they professed a desire for cultural awareness and understanding for their youth, instilling such awareness was not a significant component of their parenting efforts. Neither was it part of their own daily existence. One father summarized:

I try to pass some things along from our little part of history to [son]. . . . But sometimes facts are just facts. He doesn’t see for instance, framed pictures of Black people in our house. Just something as objective as that. . . . What I’m saying, I guess, is that there are very few White families that would be just naturally and un-self-consciously multiracial in the cultural atmosphere that surrounds their kids. But I think that’s kind of what you have to have in order to really make your kids be able to cross racial barriers.

The other parents in this focus group volunteered their lack of knowledge about other cultures and often deferred the responsibility to develop understanding to the schools or even to their own children. Indeed, several parents volunteered that from multicultural units offered in school, their children knew more than they about various cultures and reported that they learned more from their youth than the reverse. However, many White parents did indicate that they responded positively to their children’s descriptions of various lessons; parents’ emotional reactions have the potential to be powerful socializing messages (Goodnow, 1992).

Some parents of high school youth had a different response to the role of cultural awareness in cross-ethnic relationship development for their youth. These parents did not discuss a lack of an understanding of African American culture as a barrier to positive cross-ethnic relations, although most concurred that a greater cultural understanding would be enriching for their youth. Rather, they identified as a more significant barrier the exclusive tone the school imposed on cul-
tural understanding by limiting access to multicultural curricula to minority students or to a small number of the schools’ White student leaders. One parent commented:

I don’t know if schools should sanction dividing students. I think those are special groups that should have special times, but I don’t know that schools should be the ones to find this. If the school is going to focus on something, focus on the school as a whole, the student body. . . . If there’s a group to talk about, an ethnic group, let everyone come and let everyone learn about their culture.

Parents observed that their youth often resented the limited access for White students to these opportunities. However, as noted earlier, parents typically did not take steps to support a broadening of the activities offered by the school, create cultural awareness in their youth independent of school efforts, or promote cross-ethnic contact in other contexts. Neither did parents themselves seek familiarity with cultures other than their own.

**SUMMARY OF WHITE PARENTS’ SOCIALIZATION**

White parents’ expressed objectives, perceptions of barriers, and socialization practices appeared to reflect their position as members of the culturally defining group and their status as members of the numerical majority in this community. Although there were exceptions, White parents appeared to be largely ambivalent regarding the ethnic diversity of their children’s social lives; parents appeared to be indifferent as long as friends and playmates shared their children’s values and interests. White, middle-SES parent participants consistently identified the following two barriers to positive cross-ethnic relations: a racially homogeneous social context and differences in socioeconomic status between their youth and African American youth. Less consistently, parents viewed a lack of cultural awareness as contributing to their children’s avoidance of cross-ethnic peers. Parents’ primary means of socialization was deferral to the school; the majority of White parents participating in the study did not depict themselves as a major source of socialization of their youth’s cross-ethnic peer relations. Common to many parents was the sentiment that it was up to
African American youth to conform to standards in terms of behaviors and values of mainstream middle-class society rather than for White youth to develop expertise with members of a different culture. A small proportion of parents stood in contrast to the majority in that they had taken active steps to create cross-ethnic contact or to instill understanding that would help their children bridge ethnic and often, socioeconomic barriers.

**SOCIOECOLOGICAL AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS IN PARENTS’ SOCIALIZATION: PARENTING BY NECESSITY VERSUS FROM A POSITION OF PRIVILEGE**

White and African American parents appeared to share a common objective for their children’s peer relations: All parents wanted their children to develop rewarding relationships with friends with mutual interests and values. Yet when the pool of potential friends was ethnically diverse, vastly different starting points and socialization efforts for parental socialization of cross-ethnic peer relations were evident for African American and White parents. The prevailing objective for cross-ethnic peer relations that White parents expressed was for their children to have cross-ethnic contact; parents were decidedly ambivalent regarding whether their children should actually form cross-ethnic friendships. In contrast, to African American families in this predominantly White community, contact and relationships with White Americans were inevitable in virtually any setting. The parenting task that African American parents discussed was for their children to experience interactions with White Americans with their sense of self and healthy relationships intact.

These objectives—and the socialization of these objectives—reflected parents’ different positioning in American society and in this predominantly White community. White parents appeared to socialize their children from a position of privilege that enabled them to marginalize the task of socializing their youth to cross ethnic lines in their peer relations. By their own accounts, most of the parent participants themselves led a monocultural existence and were not pressed to develop facility with other cultures. And although they expressed appreciation or excitement with respect to their children’s school-based
cross-ethnic contact, parents did not appear to perceive a relationship between their children’s ability to forge positive cross-ethnic relationships and their well-being, success at school, and adjustment as adults. Thus, White parents had the luxury of not having to deal with ethnic diversity in their children’s relationships unless they chose to make it an issue. And appearing to operate from a colorblind perspective, many White parents expressed the belief that ethnic group membership should not be considered as an issue in relationships.

In this parenting context, White parents’ overt socialization efforts to promote positive cross-ethnic peer relations primarily took the form of sending their children to ethnically diverse schools. As evidenced by the barriers to positive cross-ethnic peer relations that parents outlined and parents’ responses to those barriers, White parents largely deferred the responsibility to promote positive cross-ethnic relations to the schools and to the ethnic minority youth with whom their children came into contact. Beyond living in neighborhoods that were associated with ethnically diverse schools, parents’ socialization efforts were limited to occasional and isolated interaction with cultures beyond their families’ own culture. As a result, as Frankenberg (1993) suggested, White parents appeared to communicate to their youth that cross-ethnic relationships were limited to specific contexts and were not a regular part of one’s daily experience.

By contrast, African American parents appeared to approach the socialization of cross-ethnic peer relations from a position of necessity occasioned by their ethnic minority status in American society and their numerical minority status in this particular community. African American children faced potentially negative consequences if they could not manage cross-ethnic peer relations. In an immediate sense, the pool of possible friends was severely constrained in number if children limited their relationships exclusively to African American peers. In the longer term, their children ran the risk of economic and social problems if they could not relate to members of the culturally defining group (LaFromboise et al., 1993).

African American parents’ daily existence modeled the very normalcy of cross-ethnic relations that parents desired for their youth. By their own accounts, African American parents lived a bicultural existence, and in the context of their own daily lives, they talked about their interactions and relationships with White Americans, introduced
their children to their White friends, made commentary on media images depicting African Americans, and reflected on the successes and failures of using particular strategies to cope with cultural diversity as a member of a minority group. Beyond daily immersion in mainstream society, parents actively took steps to boost their children’s self-esteem and self-concept as an individual and an African American and to engender coping strategies to manage discrimination in anticipation of and response to difficult interactions with White Americans.

In the context of the current study, it is difficult to separate parents’ reactions to their ethnic minority or majority status from their reactions to numerical minority or majority status in the community. For instance, African American parents may have been strongly proactive and reactive agents of socialization because the pool of potential relationships available to their youth was largely White. Other studies of African American parenting demonstrate that parents increase their ethnic-related socialization efforts when they are in a numerical minority in a community or neighborhood (Tatum, 1987; Thornton et al., 1990). It is unlikely, however, in any context that African American parents would assume a passive role with respect to relating to White individuals as African American youth must ultimately be able to interact successfully with White members of society (LaFromboise et al., 1993).

It is unclear whether a smaller proportion of White members of a community would elicit greater parental socialization with respect to cross-ethnic peer relations among White parents. In his study of a community with significant proportions of African American, Mexican, Filipino, as well as White residents, Peshkin (1991) described White parents as largely ambivalent to cross-ethnic peer relations as long as relations did not reach the level of dating. Parents who were more opposed to cross-ethnic relations had moved to less ethnically diverse school districts, a response that many parents participating in the current study had observed among their peers. Direct comparisons of parents’ efforts in different contexts would help to clarify the nature of parents’ socialization in response to social versus numerical status.

The results of the current study underscore that parental socialization is embedded in a broader context in which parents must respond to multiple—and sometimes competing—messages. The school emerged as a major source of influence, shaping both African Ameri-
can and White parents’ efforts. Among African American parents, there was general consensus that parents, not the schools or other socializing agents, should be the primary source of skills for responding to barriers to cross-ethnic relationships. Consistent with Ogbo’s (1991; Ogbo & Simons, 1998) thesis, many African American parents were suspicious of the school’s efforts and viewed the school as contributing to rather than ameliorating cross-ethnic avoidance. Many African American parents sought to insulate their children from what they perceived to be discriminatory practices of the school that thwarted positive cross-ethnic relationships, such as unequal access to extracurricular activities, and viewed the multicultural curricula used in the elementary schools as too superficial to have a positive effect on youth’s cross-ethnic relationships. Indeed, many of African American parents’ socialization efforts appeared to be intended to counter or to diffuse their children’s school experiences.

Many White parents were ambivalent to the schools’ practices that addressed cross-ethnic peer relations; these parents essentially deferred socialization regarding cross-ethnic peer relations to the school. Some White parents appeared to reinforce the schools’ multicultural efforts through their positive reactions to their children’s accounts of their experiences or less commonly, through their participation in school efforts. Few White parents appeared to supplement actively their children’s school-based cross-ethnic contact. Finally, a small proportion felt that the school placed too much emphasis on multiculturalism and not enough on academic rigor; these parents actively and often explicitly countered their youth’s experiences in school in ways intended to promote cross-ethnic avoidance.

In addition, their youth’s level of schooling appeared to have implications for White parents’ socialization. School efforts to promote positive cross-ethnic relations, including multicultural curricula, were perceived more positively by the parents of elementary school youth compared with the parents of high school youth. Among parents who favored cross-ethnic contact and relationship development for their youth, the parents’ perceptions of concerted elementary school efforts to promote positive cross-ethnic relations seemed to alleviate parental responsibility to directly address these issues. In contrast, parents of high school youth often reported displeasure with the exclusivity of the schools’ multicultural efforts. However, up to that point, few had
taken steps to supplement school practices and expressed an unwillingness to intervene in their adolescents’ peer relations (also see Brown, Hamm, & Meyerson, 1996).

Finally, discussions among African American parents pointed to connections between peer group and parent socialization. Although there was little evidence that the African American parents participating in this study actively advocated avoidance of White peers, in parents’ expressed views, African American peers pressured their youth to avoid White peers. A component of African American parents’ socialization involved countering peer influences to avoid White peers through discussion, promotion of sense of self, and the development of decision-making skills.

IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

A quotation from an African American parent captures the proactive nature of African American parents’ socialization regarding cross-ethnic peer relations, directly addressing how cross-ethnic relations are part of normal daily living:

For me it’s been from day one, just making her aware of the fact that regardless of what people look like or what they have, that people are people and we treat everybody with kindness. They may look a little different from us in any way, I don’t really just break it down into the racial area. . . . I just get her to look beyond those things that are different and look for those things where we can relate, where we have things in common. And she’s beautiful at that. (FG3)

A quotation from a White parent demonstrates White parents’ concern with cross-ethnic relations but belies the passivity and inaction common to White parents’ efforts in this study:

I don’t know what it is, because we’re good, liberal, middle-class people. They don’t hear anything that is indicative of any sort of racial animosity in their home. Nor do they from anyone they know. And yet, and I don’t know if this true with your kids or not, they really seem to know that there’s some kind of wall there. And they’re not very eager to cross it. (FG2)
African American and White parents revealed a range of perspectives regarding understandings, skills, and experiences that youth need to relate positively to cross-ethnic peers. They identified various practices such as discussion, modeling, and attempts to create contact that they used to shape their youth’s experiences. The variety of socialization messages and practices that parents described intimate that within and across ethnic groups, youth attending ethnically diverse schools are prepared by parents in vastly different ways to relate to cross-ethnic peers. However, future research efforts must consider the role of parents’ socialization messages with respect to youth’s actual peer relations. Are African American parents’ discussions, explicit efforts to enhance self-esteem, and daily modeling of positive relationships with Whites helpful to youth in their daily experiences in ethnically diverse schools and other contexts? Does White parents’ silence on these issues, in deference to school practices, enable youth to interact positively with cross-ethnic peers? Limited research provides some evidence that parents’ efforts are related to youth’s self-reported cross-ethnic peer relations. African American parents’ usage of discussions about ethnic relations was associated with their adolescents’ more positive attitudes about cross-ethnic relations; both African American and White parents who used practices such as modeling and who took steps to create cross-ethnic contact had adolescents who reported more cross-ethnic friendships (Hamm, 1999).

In addition, recent socialization frameworks (Phelen et al., 1991) point to a need to consider the meanings that youth themselves integrate from parents’ socialization. Indeed, some research cautions that youth may not integrate the meaning that parents intend. Ogbu (1974) observed that African American parents’ practices intended to orient youth to anticipate bias actually engendered hostility in their youth toward mainstream institutions such as the school. Fordham (1997) worried that the efforts of poor African American parents to deny the significance of ethnicity in daily experiences left adolescents with no outlet to manage daily ethnic tensions in the school environment. Schofield (1986), too, speculated that adolescents’ difficulties in negotiating cross-ethnic relations emanated from parents’ and other socializing agents’ promotion of a colorblind perspective that did not acknowledge the significance of ethnic group membership in relationships.
Finally, it is important to interpret the findings of this study in the context of the methodology employed. Parents’ conscious, overt, and intentional socialization efforts were examined. In exploring parental beliefs and behaviors through interviews, subtle or unconscious socialization efforts were possibly missed, as were efforts that may have seemed to parents to be socially undesirable. The observations of this study are predicated on what parents report that they do, not necessarily what they actually do. In addition, the study focused on parental socialization in a single community. Naturally, exceptions to the generalizations drawn regarding African American and White parents’ socialization of cross-ethnic relations are acknowledged. Socialization is a dynamic process, and parents in the current study clearly responded to many contextual and life circumstances in raising their youth, some of which were not discussed here. Given the suggested influence of context on parental socialization, it will be instructive for future research to consider more closely the interactions among community features, school characteristics, and parental beliefs and practices across a range of schools and communities.

Yet the findings of this study serve as a reminder that schools do not operate independently of other contexts in students’ lives. Children and adolescents enter the school equipped with varying knowledge, beliefs, and skills that will influence their reaction to peers from a different ethnic background and their receptivity to school efforts to promote positive cross-ethnic peer relationships. If schools are to continue to seek ways to promote positive cross-ethnic peer relations among their students, they must have a clearer understanding of their students’ out-of-school socialization experiences.

NOTES

1. The emergence of these themes is consistent with an African American socialization framework proposed by Boykin and Toms (1985) in which African American parents must negotiate minority experiences and African American cultural experiences simultaneously with a mainstream socialization agenda.

2. In this study, the perspective of not preparing youth to anticipate discrimination was most evident in focus groups involving African American parents of poorer socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. Researchers such as Fordham (1997), too, found this perspective among urban, poor, African American parents.
3. This position emerged only in focus groups involving middle- and upper-SES African American parents. Other researchers, including Hughes and Chen (1997), observed this position to be more common among African American parents from middle- compared to lower-SES backgrounds.

4. Peters (1985) and Ward (1996) also described African American parents’ utilization of critical analysis practices in an effort to cultivate resistance to experiences that defeated their children’s self-confidence, although information regarding the socioeconomic background of the parents was not provided in these studies. Among parent participants in the current study, such a practice was exclusive to parents from middle- and upper-socioeconomic strata. These differences may reflect discrepancies in beliefs about children found among parents from lower versus higher SES in general (McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1992) or possibly parents’ differing perceptions of the skills and orientations that their children will need to be successful in school and later in the workforce (Hughes & Chen, 1997).

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