

Tracing the Source of Children's Racial Attitudes

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How children learn about race, ethnicity, and religion depends largely on how their parents present information about different individuals and groups during crucial developmental periods. As part of a symposium at the 2016 APS Annual Convention in Chicago, three developmental psychological scientists examined the important role that parents play in shaping children's developing attitudes toward individuals from other groups.

Researcher Nicole M. Summers (Saint Louis University) is interested in how parents discuss Islam with their non-Islamic children. Summers noted that research on the psychology of religion has investigated children's understanding of Judaism and Christianity, but much less is known about how children perceive Islam, the second most common religion in the world.

"What does it mean for children's cognitive and social development when we are socializing inaccuracies about others' religious practices or spiritual beliefs?" Summers wondered.

To find out, she and her colleagues combined delivery of accurate information from a reliable source with a method called "adult testimony" — adults' accurate or inaccurate accounts of information — to examine children's attitudes toward Islam.

First, the researchers had mothers and their children read a book about a refugee family from Syria that underwent difficulties due to war and separation. Summers and her colleagues then examined how mothers talked to their children about the refugee family's religion, Islam, which was detailed in the book.

"Research has shown that children use adults' testimony to understand not only religious practices but also to understand scientific practices such as the existence of gravity [and] dietary practices," Summers said. Children's heavy reliance upon their parents as sources of information means that conveying inaccurate information could have serious consequences.

The researchers found that 8% of the children produced correct information the entire time; 16% produced partially correct information; 8% produced incorrect information in every case; and 60% indicated that they had no knowledge about the subject. The mother-child pairs tended to discuss several aspects of Islam and its practice, including questions about Allah, mosques, Imams, prayer rugs, and the preprayer cleansing ritual. Children and their mothers also discussed Islam as a religion more generally, although the researchers found many errors in the information imparted to children by their mothers.

Summers said she hopes this research will be a springboard for more studies about how Islam is viewed by non-Islamic families and children. Particularly concerning, she noted, was the fact that many of the children indicated that they had no knowledge about Islam whatsoever and that, even when mothers imparted false information, they indicated confidence in the accuracy of their beliefs.

Psychology researcher Cara Bellwood (University of Hawai'i at Mānoa) is interested in examining the effects of parents' implicit and explicit messages about another intergroup characteristic: race. As children age, they become less sure of themselves in intergroup situations, she said, which raises the question: Where does this anxiety come from?

Previous research has shown that parents' implicit beliefs about racial biases are associated with children's explicit beliefs and that parental behavior also may contribute to children's concerns about interracial interactions. Extending this line of inquiry, Bellwood and colleagues investigated how parents' explicit beliefs and nonverbal behaviors contributed to their children's behaviors when race was made salient. The researchers had parent-child dyads play a modified "guess who" game, in which a player chooses one of several hidden photos from a game board and the other player asks "yes or no" questions to establish the identity of the individual in the photo. The photos in Bellwood's version of the game included a 50-50 split of White and Black individuals, making race a highly salient characteristic.

"In this task, it really behooves the participant to ask a question associated with race, as it would eliminate half of the cards" immediately, she explained. Parents first played the game with an experimenter while their children watched; then the children were given a turn.

The researchers found that children's anxiety levels were associated with their perceptions of their parents' beliefs about prejudice:

"The [more strongly] the children believed that the parents' prejudice beliefs were fixed, the more nonverbal anxiety...they exhibited," Bellwood said.

Behaviorally, children were more anxious while watching the interactions if their parents showed high levels of nonverbal anxiety, as indicated by behaviors that included jerky movements and nervous tics. And this heightened anxiety while watching the game seemed to carry over when they played the game themselves. Given these nuanced interactions, Bellwood suggests that it is important to continue examining the potential downstream consequences of parents' beliefs about prejudice and race on their children's perceptions.

Psychological scientist Julie M. Hughes (College of New Jersey) and her collaborators have delved into how parents — especially White parents — talk to their children about race.

While research traditionally has focused on how issues of race are discussed among non-White families, Hughes said, the purpose of her research is "to examine whether there are connections between the messages that White parents give their White children" about race and the role it plays in their lives, attitudes, and behaviors later in life.

Research suggests that White parents use a range of strategies to discuss race with their children. Some may endorse a "colorblind" approach, reinforcing the idea that an individual's race and ethnicity is not important because everyone is equal, while others take a more "multicultural" approach, emphasizing that although people from various races and ethnicities differ in some ways, everyone is equal.

Hughes and her colleagues polled White 18- to 21-year-olds to investigate whether the level of racial discourse they had with their parents and the multicultural socialization they experienced in high school

was related to their ethnic and racial attitudes as emerging adults. The researchers found that individuals who engaged in high levels of racial discourse with their parents and who had consistent intergroup contact were also more likely to report positive outgroup evaluations. In addition, the results showed that close contact with members of other ethnic or racial groups in high school was especially important for predicting high levels of outgroup warmth in adulthood.

Hughes noted that the study was retrospective in nature and, therefore, dependent on participants' ability to recall past experiences truthfully and accurately.

"I would love to see some longitudinal data asking the same questions," said Hughes. "There's a surprising dearth of research on the relationship between socialization experiences in childhood and adolescents and the attitudes [of those] adults."