**Parenting in the Shadow of Ferguson:**

 **Racial Socialization Practices in Context**

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Abstract

Black parents have long faced the task of explaining the meaning of race to their children and preparing them for racist experiences. This qualitative study examines racial socialization practices in the context of a specific racialized event: the shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri. Data were gathered from 18 Black parents and adolescents living in the St. Louis region in the weeks immediately following the event. Four types of practices were identified: Parents taught their children about the racial context from which the events emerged; they taught their sons strategies to avoid danger and that their lives are valued; they emphasized dissimilarity between their children and those engaging in violent protest; and they encouraged their children to overcome discrimination through individual achievement.

Parenting in the Shadow of Ferguson: Racial Socialization Practices in Context

Black parents have long faced the task of explaining the meaning of race to their children and preparing them for racist experiences. A wide body of literature examines this practice of racial socialization and has pointed to its importance in promoting positive developmental outcomes in Black youth (Evans et al., 2012; Hughes et al., 2006; Priest et al., 2014). Parents may be especially prone to discuss race when they or their children directly experience discrimination (Hughes & Johnson, 2001). Some evidence also suggests that parental practices may be shaped by racist events occurring in the wider community or reported in the media (Thomas & Blackmon, 2015). However, less is known about the influence of specific racialized events such as the deaths of Black men in encounters with the police.

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, was fatally shot by Darren Wilson, a White police officer in Ferguson, Missouri (Thorsen & Giegerich, 2014). The exact nature of the events that preceded the shooting was contested in the weeks that followed. Officer Wilson claimed self-defense, but other witnesses characterized the incident as a racially motivated attack on a young man in a posture of surrender. Peaceful demonstrations following the incident were accompanied by violent protests and incidences of vandalism and looting. The civil unrest and militarized police response drew widespread media and political attention and served to place Ferguson and the wider St. Louis region at the center of the continuing national debate about race and social injustice in American society. Ultimately, a grand jury failed to indict Darren Wilson and a Department of Justice investigation cleared him of civil rights violations (Eckholm, 2014; U.S. Departments of Justice, 2015a).

Although the nature and extent of the public response to the death of Michael Brown was striking, the event itself was far from unusual. Black men in the St. Louis region are killed by police fire at a concerning rate. In the city of St. Louis alone (population 50% Black), a disproportionate 81% of the 37 individuals killed by police officers between 2003 and 2013 were Black (Klinger, Rosenfeld, Isom, & Deckard, 2016). Furthermore, a Department of Justice report into the Ferguson Police Department following the death of Michael Brown revealed policing practices that unfairly targeted Black community members, suggesting longstanding systemic discrimination in it and other nearby Police Departments (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015b). More generally, the St. Louis region is notable for its stratification along racial lines. An examination of 2010 Census data revealed the city of St. Louis to be the ninth most segregated in the nation (Logan & Stults, Brian, 2011). Accordingly, there are substantial economic, educational, health, and well-being disparities between the region’s Black and White residents (Rocchio, Kealy, & Posey, 2015).

The current study uses data collected in the St. Louis region in the weeks immediately after the shooting of Michael Brown to examine the ways in which Black parents discussed the death and civil unrest with their adolescent children and how they incorporated these messages into their broader racial socialization strategies. The term “racialized event” is used to describe the events in Ferguson in recognition that Michael Brown’s death drew attention to longstanding issues of racial oppression, as was made explicit in the civil unrest that followed.

**Racial Socialization**

The term *racial socialization* is used to denote the verbal and behavioral practices that parents use to communicate with their children about the social significance of race and to prepare them for life in a racist society (Hughes et al., 2006; Lesane-Brown, 2006). Racial socialization is considered to be of particular importance in Black families in which parents must teach their children to succeed despite personal and systemic experiences of racism (Coard & Sellers, 2005; Lesane-Brown, 2006). Scholarly interest in the topic has been maintained by evidence that racial socialization practices are associated with various positive outcomes for Black adolescents, including self-esteem (Constantine & Blackmon, 2002), mental health (Davis & Stevenson, 2006; McHale et al., 2006), and academic engagement and achievement (Wang & Huguley, 2012). Youth who receive certain racial socialization messages from their parents are also better able to cope with racial discrimination (Neblett, Philip, Cogburn, & Sellers, 2006).

The messages contained in racial socialization practices are varied and Black parents do not all seek to shape their children’s behaviors, beliefs, and values in the same way. Hughes and colleagues (2006) identify four broad categories of racial socialization that Black and other parents use. *Cultural socialization* describes the ways in which parents teach their children about their heritage, promote cultural practices, and seek to instill pride in their racial background. *Preparation for bias* consists of parents’ strategies to prepare their children for experiences of racism and discrimination. *Promotion of mistrust* refers to parents’ warnings about racial barriers to success and the need to be wary of members of other racial groups. Lastly, *Egalitarianism* describes the practices of parents who either promote individual qualities that will help their children succeed in mainstream society or who avoid discussions of race entirely. Other literature also refers to *negative messages* that serve to bolster negative stereotypes and to promote mistrust of other Black people (e.g., Bentley-Edwards & Stevenson, 2016; Neblett, Smalls, Ford, Nguyên, & Sellers, 2009).

The racial socialization practices that Black parents choose to employ with their children are shaped by a range of individual and contextual factors. Two such influences are potentially relevant to understanding parenting following specific racialized events: parental racial identity and experiences of discrimination (Hughes et al., 2006).

Parents for whom race is central to their identity and who have strong beliefs about what it means to belong to the Black community employ different racial socialization practices than those for whom race is less salient. These former parents are more likely to orient their children toward Black culture and to teach racial pride (Hughes, 2003; Thornton, 1997). Conversely, parents who do not hold race to be especially central to their identity are more likely to teach their children egalitarian messages about race and to emphasize the importance of individual self-worth (White-Johnson, Ford, & Sellers, 2010). Beliefs about the ways in which Black people are viewed by the rest of society are also important. Parents who believe that societal opinions are generally negative tend to prepare their children more often for experiences of discrimination than other parents (White-Johnson et al., 2010).

Racial socialization practices in Black families are also shaped by personal experiences of discrimination. In general, more frequent discriminatory experiences appear to lead a greater emphasis on racial socialization, and in particular, preparation for bias (Hughes & Johnson, 2001; McNeil Smith, Reynolds, Fincham, & Beach, 2016; Stevenson, McNeil, Herrero-Taylor, & Davis, 2005). Furthermore, practices may be influenced by expectations of discrimination in the communities that family members live and participate. For example, Black families that live in physically and socially disordered neighborhoods, where residents are fearful of victimization, are more likely to warn their children about racial bias and to promote mistrust of people of other races (Caughy, Nettles, O’Campo, & Lohrfink, 2006). Parents who experience their communities and wider society as fundamentally discriminatory may shape their parenting practices according to their expectations of the experiences their children will have in a racist society.

**Racial Socialization and Racialized Events**

 Black parents who seek to teach their children about their culture inevitably face the task of describing historical and contemporary racial injustices. However, little is known about the specific practices that parents employ in the immediate aftermath of events like those in Ferguson. A single example is provided by a study of Black parents’ responses to the shooting of unarmed Black teenager, Trayvon Martin (Thomas & Blackmon, 2015). The authors conducted a nationwide online survey several months after the 2012 incident. They found that the shooting intensified worries that parents had for their children, especially boys. Parents affirmed to their children that they were still living in a racist society, and helped them talk about their feelings following the incident. They also gave them guidelines for how their children should behave to minimize racist threats in general, or if they found themselves in a similar situation. Because the study participants did not personally know Trayvon Martin or live in his community, the authors speculate that their shared group membership with the Black teenager led to a vicarious experience of violence that in turn shaped racial socialization messages.

In view of the ongoing violence against Black men in encounters with law enforcement and the associated risk of physical and psychological harm to Black children and adults (Cooper & Fullilove, 2016), it is important to understand how parents respond to racialized events, and how they may be best supported in their parenting strategies. The current study therefore explores the racial socialization practices of Black parents living in the geographical vicinity of Ferguson in the weeks immediately following the death of Michael Brown and subsequent and protests. Specifically, the study addresses the research question: What racial socialization messages do parents and adolescents report being taught in their families in response to the events in Ferguson?

**Methods**

The data analyzed in the current study are gleaned from a larger project concerned with parent involvement in education for Black high school students living in low-income urban neighborhoods. Study participants all lived in the city of St. Louis or in the inner-ring suburbs that include Ferguson. Data collection began in June 2014 and concluded at the beginning of November 2014. The current analysis focuses on the 18 interviews that were conducted after August 9, 2014 when Michael Brown was killed. On October 8, 2014, another Black teenager, Vonderrit Myers, was killed in St. Louis city by an off-duty White police officer, reigniting city-wide protests. Ten of the 18 interviews discussed here were conducted after the death of Vonderrit Myers.

Although the events in Ferguson and St. Louis city were unexpected, a focus of the larger study was to examine racial socialization practices in school and community contexts. Discussions about the shooting and subsequent civil unrest naturally arose. The city wide racial tension formed a visual and sometimes audible backdrop to the data collection. Some interviews took place in locations only a block or two from buildings that had been burned out during the rioting. One took place within earshot of protests.

**Recruitment**

Following IRB approval, parent and adolescent dyads were recruited for the larger study through a college access program serving low-income high school students. In order to participate in the program, students had to demonstrate an interest in attending college and minimum academic ability (GPA above 2.0). Participants were selected using a maximum variation sampling technique that sought diversity in the type of primary caregiver, gender of the student, and high school attended (Patton, 2015). Potential families were identified through agency records and sent letters inviting them to contact the researcher.

The current analysis includes interviews with eight mothers and one father. The mean age of the parents was 40 (range 33-57). Four were married or living with a partner and five were single. Parents mostly had some college education (n=5); the others had either graduated college (n=3) or had less than high school (n=1). One parent was a full time student, the remainder worked in service industries (n=3), clerical positions (n=4), or paraprofessional positions (n=1). The majority of adolescents were female (n=7). Two were 18 years old, four were 17, and three were 16.

**Procedure**

Parents and adolescents were interviewed separately from each other in their homes or local restaurants. Each was given a $20 gift card to compensate them for their time. Separate semi-structured interview guides were used for parents and adolescents, although both covered the same topics relevant to the larger study. The data analyzed here chiefly, though not exclusively, arose from a question expressed in the caregiver guide as “What messages would you like [child] to understand about him/herself as a young Black man/ woman?” Follow up probes included “What do they need to do to get ahead in school/ after school?” and “How do you get this across to them?” The adolescent guide used similarly worded questions designed to elicit their perspective on their parents’ practices. Each individual interview lasted about an hour and was audio recorded and subsequently transcribed.

**Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). First, provisional open codes were ascribed to short segments of the data*.* Next, the most frequently used and significant open codes were combined to form more conceptual focused codes. Of relevance here, open codes that related to parents’ messages to their children about being Black were combined to form the focused code *racial socialization,* so named because the practices closely resembled those described in the literature outlined above. The constant comparison technique was used throughout the analysis whereby each interviewee’s words included within a particular code were juxtaposed against each other to see if they were describing the same concept. This practice ensures that all the evidence is considered and that codes are not overly influenced by themes emerging from the first interviews (Charmaz, 2006; Dey, 2007).

A provisional codebook was developed from the focused codes. Each interview was then coded by two research team members using the qualitative analysis software, Dedoose (Version 5.3.22; Dedoose, 2015). Disagreements about code applications were resolved through discussion. In order to establish the credibility of the analysis, key themes were discussed with stakeholders at the partnering agency, including staff members and former program participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The current study examines parental actions and messages assigned to the *racial socialization* code, focusing on examples relating to the events in Ferguson.

**Findings**

Four subthemes were identified in the analysis: *teaching the context, fear for sons, we are not the same,* and *rise above.* Due to space limits, each theme is illustrated through one or two exemplary parent-adolescent conversations that describe practicescommonly discussed throughout the interviews. Pseudonyms have been assigned to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

**Teaching the Context**

Parents and adolescents reported engaging in conversations about the wider context in which the events in Ferguson took place. Parents taught their children that they live in a fundamentally racist society. The shooting of a Black teenager by a White police officer should be understood as part of the fabric of everyday life in urban communities. This interpretation of events was exemplified through a conversation Alexis, a 17-year-old girl living in a majority Black neighborhood, reported having with her mother, Janis. The interview took place 10 weeks after the events in Ferguson, and about a week after the further unrest sparked by the death of VonDerrit Myers.

Alexis began by explaining that her mother wanted her to be aware of “what was going on in the world” and of the role of racism in shaping their community. She continued:

Did you hear about that Ferguson thing going on? So, she [my mom] was telling me the reality of things. Because I have my opinions about it, and of course, a thousand other people have their opinions about it, but mine was, well, “Why are they making a big deal out of, you know, just this one boy, just this one kid, just this one story?” … It was just, well, in every case there was a cop that was racist and killed an African American man, why not make a big deal out of that, those cases instead of this one? And she was like, “You know, it was a calm before the storm kind of thing.” I totally get that. And she was just like, “Well, people are tired out here. They feel like now is the time to take a stand.”

Janis responded to Alexis’ questions about what made the death of Michael Brown different by suggesting that it was a tipping point. From her perspective, the incident had brought to the surface feelings of resentment and injustice that had been building in local Black communities for a long time. In this way, the subsequent unrest, although precipitated by the events in Ferguson, was a product of longstanding and ingrained racism.

Other parents set the recent events within a wider context by linking them with specific personal experiences of discrimination. They fit the death of Michael Brown into a pattern of negative interactions with White authority figures, such as teachers or police, that were part of their own or their children’s experience. Their purpose, similar to Janis, was to warn their children that they lived in a fundamentally racist society and to prepare them for further racist experiences. These messages are examples of the racial socialization practice described in the literature as preparation for bias, and were similarly favored by caregivers in the previously mentioned study about the shooting of Trayvon Martin (Hughes et al., 2006; Thomas & Blackmon, 2015). Caregivers used the deaths of both unarmed Black teenagers to reinforce existing messages about the longstanding pattern of oppression experienced by the Black community.

It is worth noting that Alexis remained unconvinced by her mother’s explanations of the scale of protest that followed the shooting of Michael Brown. She still did not understand why all deaths did not precipitate such visible and vocal outrage:

I was like, “Oh, well, why not all the other times, why now and not the other times?” Because, if like that happened to my future son, like God forbid, I would have done something too, you know, right when it happened.

Alexis, identifying with an imagined visceral reaction of a mother, believed that each incident demanded an immediate reaction of a comparable scale. A similar attitude was reflected in other adolescents in the study who expressed a greater inclination than their parents to identify and challenge racism. These youth were not content to understand their experiences within the context of a racist society; they wanted to change that society. Some parents, however, cautioned their children against impulsive responses to racist incidents. They believed that their children, especially boys, must learn to behave in a manner that avoided unnecessary conflict.

 **Fear for Sons**

Parents reported that their concern for the physical and mental well-being of their sons had been reaffirmed following the death of Michael Brown. Because of their gender and their race, Black boys would be vulnerable to physical victimization as well as racial discrimination. Single mother, Joy, and her 16-year-old son, Terence, were interviewed just days after the death of Vonderrit Myers had reignited racial tensions in the city. Joy described how she was teaching Terence to be aware of potential physical dangers as a young Black man living in an urban community:

He needs to be aware of what’s around him at all times, [to] have a spirit of discernment. Like, if you’re out on the streets walking around, be more aware of your surroundings. Is there somebody walking behind you? Is there somebody following you? Just be aware, because, you know, we’ve seen over the last several months that things happen. Don’t know why they happen, don’t know the truth of what’s happened, but it’s still scary to have a young Black man as a son.

Although Joy was reluctant to put a particular interpretation on the events in Ferguson, the death of Michael Brown was enough to reignite her worry for her son. The threat faced by young Black men in their neighborhoods was unpredictable and continuous. Adolescents could become victims of violence even if they were not themselves engaging in threatening behavior. Terence should therefore maintain a state of constant vigilance when out in public.

 Parents also worried about the psychological impact that growing up in a society where Black male lives were devalued could have on their sons. Joy continued the above narrative by stating that she wanted Terence to know “that he’s valued, that his life matters.” She warned him that as a Black man he would not receive affirmation from many people. Terence reported his mother teaching him that “expectations are always going to be low … people won’t see you as just Terence; they’ll see you as Terence the Black guy.” She wanted him to understand that despite the low expectations of his achievement and behavior, despite the violence experienced by others like him in their communities, the lives of young Black men matter.

Joy had taught Terence about the special burden of being Black and male for many years, as had most of the caregivers of boys interviewed throughout the larger study. Indeed, the need to teach sons how to act in a manner that promotes their own safety and affirms their value has long been recognized in the racial socialization literature (Hughes et al., 2006; Varner & Mandara, 2013), and has received increasing attention in the national discourse about race. For example, Joy’s instructions to Terence are reflected in the writing of journalist, Ta-Nehisi Coates in a letter to his 15-year-old son (Coates, 2015). Coates recounts the recent deaths of Black men at the hands of police as a warning to his son that he must, because of his race, bear responsibility for guarding his body in a way that other boys do not. He also cautions his son to “Always remember that Trayvon Martin was a boy, that Tamir Rice was a particular boy, that Jordan Davis was a boy, just like you.” Here Coates echoes Joy’s concern that her son would be seen only as his race and gender rather than as “Terence.” In identifying with Michael Brown and others like him, their children should not forget that each was a unique person and that every individual life should be valued.

**We are not like them**

Other parents used conversations with their children to separate themselves, both in terms of behavior and of identity, from the people engaging in violent protests. They explicitly condemned the rioting that was taking place in several areas of the city. Parents were concerned on two counts: first, that their children would see the violence as a legitimate expression of shared Black identity; and second, that negative stereotypes of Black teenagers being portrayed by the media would adversely affect their own children.

Antoinette lived with her husband and two sons in a diverse suburban neighborhood. Throughout her interview she emphasized that her children had been “sheltered” from many of the realities of urban life. In describing conversations she had with 16-year-old Marcus following the events in nearby Ferguson, Antoinette stressed that his identity as a Black male did not mean that he had anything in common with the people engaging in violent protest. She described her own perceptions of the civil unrest and they ways in which she relayed her opinions to her sons in the following manner:

Looking at this whole situation that’s going on now, it’s just kind of like, wow, look at the male population, they see the news and what other kids are doing, and I’m like, I’ve told them on several occasions, “If I take you and drop you off, if I put you down there with these, for lack of better words, you know, thugs, you all wouldn’t have a clue what to do.” I let them know, “No, you don’t have to be that stereotypical male.”

Antoinette chose to emphasize the dissimilarities between her sons and the “thugs” (principally social class) over dwelling on their commonalities (race and gender). This appeared to be consistent with an overall egalitarian racial socialization strategy that de-emphasized the importance of race.

In his own interview, Marcus described how his parents generally approached similar conversations not as “this is what other Black men are doing,” but rather “this is what men are doing; this is what other kids, not White kids, not Black kids, this is what kids are doing.” In this way, Antoinette extended her egalitarian racial socialization messages to the conversation about Ferguson. Marcus and his brother should avoid any association with the protestors, not because of any statement it would make about their race, but rather because of the statement it would make about their social class and general behavior.

 In contrast, other parents, although still condemning violent behavior, chose to focus on the centrality of race to their children’s lives. Sixteen-year-old Kelly lived in a predominantly Black working class neighborhood with her mom and younger sister and brother. Her dad, Charles, lived in a similar neighborhood a few minutes drive away. Kelly was interviewed less than a week after the death of Michael Brown and described extensive conversations that she had had with her dad in the last few days. She explained how he, while acknowledging the reality of racial stereotypes, had encouraged her to take pride in her heritage and to live her life in a way that would benefit other Black people. Kelly went on to describe the ways in which the conversations had influenced her thinking:

Like, this week, he was talking to us about different stuff and our culture and stuff. So, I think like, that gets in my mind, like I can do more for my people … But with society, and what’s going on currently, it’s hard, you know. It’s already a statistic on us, but some people, what’s they’re doing now, it doesn’t represent African Americans. So with people who are actually trying to get something done with their lives, they make it hard on us, because it’s like, “This is African American teenagers.”

Kelly’s father encouraged her to embrace her identity as Black, while rejecting the negative stereotypes associated with poor urban Black communities. Charles used cultural socialization practices at the same time as preparing Kelly for bias that she might experience, especially in light of the portrayals of Black teenagers flooding the media.

It is notable that although Antoinette and Charles had different opinions about the role that race should play in their children’s lives, both wanted to separate their children from certain sections of the Black community. In a study of Black college students, Bentley-Edwards and Stevenson (2016) note that parents may convey negative stereotypes of other Black people in order to propel their children to overcome low expectations, and to avoid being limited by disparaging views of their community. In the current study, Antoinette conveyed negative messages about urban “thugs” to suggest to her sons that race should not be the most prominent part of their identity. In contrast, Charles encouraged Kelly to see race as central to her identity, but to reject violent actions as a legitimate expression of Black identity.

**Rise Above**

Parents may have seen events in Ferguson as symptomatic of the historic structural racism experienced by the Black community, but the most common response they recommended for their children was resistance through individual achievement. Seventeen-year-old Kiara and her mother, Brianna, were interviewed the day after the death of Vonderrit Myers. The conversation took place in a restaurant within earshot of protests that erupted once again across the St. Louis region. Like other adolescent participants, Kiara spoke about how her parents had always emphasized the reality of racism, saying, “they have always taught me that this is a world where race matters … they’ve definitely always taught me that discrimination is real.” Their messages about race, however, stressed that Kiara didn’t have to absorb the stereotypes as part of her own identity:

My mom told me to be strong. To show, like, rep myself in a certain way. ‘Cos there are people out there that they, they carry around this stereotype because they feel like they have to, but to know that that’s not how you have to act. If you want people to think of you differently, then you have to act differently.

Although the events of the previous months had served to intensify the conversation about the ‘problem’ of urban Black teens, and to underscore the reality of racism, parents like Brianna suggested that their academically gifted children need not be limited by outside perceptions of their peers.

The majority of parents who emphasized individual achievement as a response to the fraught racial atmosphere of their hometown did not speak of it in terms of a wider cultural resistance. Some deliberately downplayed the importance of a Black corporate identity, in favor of a unique individual identity. Although Janis had explained the events in Ferguson to her daughter, Alexis, as a response to continuing oppression, she did not advocate participation in a communal response, explaining, “In our house we don’t focus on race.” She continued:

I want to let her know, “You’re not bounded by your race, [although] people will try to put you there.” It’s like you have to take full advantage of being you. Not being in that group of people and that. You never know what happen tomorrow, what’s going to happen the next day. Live your life, but live it in a way where it’s so positive that you will shine through no matter what situation you’re in.

For Janis, life in her urban neighborhood would always be precarious. Her daughter should therefore do everything she could to throw off limiting racial stereotypes by purposefully asserting her own individual value.

It is perhaps surprising that parents should maintain such egalitarian racial socialization practices when surrounded by visible and audible reminders of the fraught racial relations in their city. However, previous studies have suggested that egalitarianism is predictive of positive academic outcomes (Banerjee, Harrell, & Johnson, 2011). It is possible that in the current study, evidence of academic ability also led to more egalitarian racial socialization messages. Parents may have emphasized individual ability over racial solidarity because they believed their children had the potential to go to college. Educational success could enable their children to escape the urban neighborhoods of St. Louis as well as to defy the stereotypes of delinquent Black teens portrayed across the media.

**Discussion**

Parents reported using a variety of racial socialization techniques in the weeks following the death of Michael Brown and subsequent civil unrest. They prepared their children for bias by reminding them of the pervasive presence of racism and its reach beyond the one incident in Ferguson. Boys were also warned of the dangers that faced them in their neighborhoods and reminded of their intrinsic worth, despite the prevalence of negative narratives about young Black men. One family talked about the importance of remembering Black culture while the majority provided more egalitarian messages that emphasized individual achievement over racial progress. In this way, parents used strategies commonly identified in the literature and applied them to a specific situation (Hughes et al., 2006; Thomas & Blackmon, 2015).

The death of Michael Brown was fit into parents’ continuing conversations with their children about what it means to be Black in St. Louis and the nation as a whole. Some parents used the events to reiterate the message to their sons that Black males, living in a segregated city such as St. Louis, could expect to be victimized. Membership of their racial and gender group and physical location made them vulnerable to violence; they should therefore adjust their behavior to seem less threatening and to avoid potentially dangerous situations. Although the focus here, and in the national conversation, has been on Black men, Black women are also vulnerable to victimization. Other parents, although not explicitly identifying their children with Michael Brown, recognized that both their sons and daughters were subject to the same forces of discrimination as he was because of their shared race. They saw his death as further evidence of longstanding racism in the St. Louis region and nation.

In choosing to emphasize commonality with Michael Brown as the victim of a racialized event, participants in the current study echoed the experiences of other communities whose members have been victims of hate crimes. For example, a Canadian study reported how members of various identity groups experienced vicarious victimization when another member of their group was subjected to a hate crime (Perry & Alvi, 2012). Participants reported experiencing similar emotions, such as fear and vulnerability, and making behavioral changes analogous to those who were personally victimized. Similarly, the fears that parents in the current study already had for their children were reinforced by the death of Michael Brown, leading them to warn their children again about the precarious position of Black teenagers. As Joy expressed, “It’s a scary thing to have a young Black man as a son.”

The discussions that parents held with their children about the meaning of being identified as a member of the Black community were, however, more nuanced than a simple shared victimization. Neither parents nor adolescents closely identified with those engaging in violent protest, even if they understood their motives. Participants felt that all Black people would be judged negatively because of the actions of the few. The response was either to de-emphasize the centrality of race in the identity of the protesters (“they don’t represent us”) or to de-emphasize race in their own identity (“we don’t focus on race”). Both stances were ultimately incorporated into a racial socialization perspective that emphasized individual achievement as the most viable way of winning acceptance in mainstream society. In this time of crisis, parents saw the need to reinforce their previous messages about legitimate expressions of racial identity, and to concurrently dismiss violence as a viable tool for change. In doing so they reflected an ideology of assimilation into mainstream society more traditionally associated with higher status members of the Black community (Shelton & Emerson, 2009).

**Limitations**

Several limitations should be borne in mind when interpreting the findings of the study. First, as with all qualitative studies, the sample cannot be presumed to be representative of all Black families. In particular, all the adolescents in the study were considered to be college-able and the findings may not be relevant for adolescents for whom higher education is not a viable path. Second, the recruitment method may have resulted in a sample that included only those most willing to talk about the parent-child relationship, including issues of race. Their perspectives may be different from other families. Third, both sampling and interview design were driven by the original research questions of the larger study. The participants interviewed after the events in Ferguson do not represent the diversity that was sought for the larger study (the majority of caregivers are mothers and the majority of students are female). Additionally, because participants were not directly asked about Ferguson, it is not possible to speculate about possible contexts where the events were not considered to be relevant. However, the frequency with which participants referred to the death of Michael Brown and the subsequent civil unrest suggests their saliency for racial socialization practices, and the importance of further research in this area.

**Implications and Conclusion**

The findings presented here have several implications for future research. For example, the analysis suggested a possible link between parents’ understanding of what it means to be Black in a time of racial turmoil and their racial socialization practices. Future studies might examine how racial identity affects perceptions of (or is impacted by) such racialized events and the consequences for racial socialization practices. Future research might also explore racial socialization following racialized events among other populations such as middle class Black families or families of other ethnicities.

The findings also have implications for teachers, therapists, social workers, and other professionals who work with Black adolescents and their parents. First, professionals should be aware that, even in adolescence, parents play an important role in their children’s processing of what it means to be Black in the aftermath of racialized events. Furthermore, they should not assume that all Black parents interpret racist events in the same way or socialize their children in the same manner. For example, parents differed in the extent to which they encouraged their children to identify with the wider Black community. Accordingly, professionals should take time to explore parents’ messages with adolescents as part of their own role in helping youth make meaning of racialized events.

It should also be recognized that Black parents face additional stresses in their parenting because of the violence experienced by members of their own communities. The death of Michael Brown appeared to intensify fears of victimization, especially for Black boys. Professionals should consider the possibility that adolescents – and their parents - have been traumatized by their vicarious experiences They should therefore be alert to families’ mental health needs and informed about appropriate interventions.

Lastly, the unique strengths of Black families should be recognized. Parents’ racial socialization strategies following the events in Ferguson were part of an ongoing dialogue about what it means to be Black in a fundamentally racist society. Professionals should recognize the wealth of expertise in the Black community about navigating discriminatory systems and resisting oppression (Yosso, 2005), and consider ways in which they can involve parents in formulating responses to racialized events.

The current study is unique in offering a glimpse into racial socialization practices in the immediate aftermath of a nationally examined racialized event. Although Ferguson was notable for the attention it garnered, the violent death of Black men and women in encounters with law enforcement are all too common occurrences. Since Michael Brown’s death, the names of Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, and Philando Castile among many others have become nationally known. Parents must continue to incorporate these and other racialized events into their everyday discussion of what it means to be a Black young man or woman living in a fundamentally discriminatory environment.

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