The Voices of Interracial and Interethnic Couples Raising Biracial, Multiracial, and Bi-ethnic Children Under 10 Years Old

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences of parents in an interracial or interethnic marriage who were raising children under 10 years old. Nineteen parents married to someone of a different race or ethnicity and with at least one child under 10 years old were surveyed and interviewed between September 2020 and April 2021 as part of a larger study of interracial and interethnic families. A majority of the parents identified four themes that emerged from their parenting practices. These were: (1) racism/discrimination, which they saw or were concerned about in reference to their child(ren); (2) the child(ren)'s ethnic-racial identity development; (3) the child(ren)'s skin color; and (4) the benefits to the child(ren) of being multiracial, biracial, or bi-ethnic. In addition, some of the parents expressed heightened concern for their child(ren) due to the political climate as reflected by recent racial protests and anti-Asian and anti-Latinx hate crimes. Social workers should practice with cultural humility when helping families deal with racism, microaggressions, and the identity development of children. In addition, they should explore the strengths of interracial and interethnic families.

Keywords Biracial children · Multiracial children · Bi-ethnic children · Interracial marriage · Interethnic marriage · Children's ethnic-racial identity · Intermarriage

Interracial and interethnic marriages have been on the rise in the United States for many decades (Barroso et al., 2020) and, by 2016, reached over 10% of all marriages (Rico et al., 2018). One in six newlywed couples are in interracial or interethnic marriages (Livingston & Brown, 2017) resulting in an increasing number of parents raising biracial, bi-ethnic, and multiracial children. Limited research has explored the experiences of individuals and families in interracial marriages in the United States (Fusco & Rauktis, 2012; Skinner & Rae, 2019), a topic that has become particularly salient given recent attention to matters of race amid the current political environment and following the deaths of George Floyd and other Black men and women at the hands of police officers and the resulting Black Lives Matter marches. Researchers at the Pew Research Center found, in mid-2020, that 69% of people surveyed had talked to family and friends about race and racial equality (Parker et al., 2020). This is likely to include discussions of multiple races, as hate crimes against Latinx people increased in 2019 (Department of Justice, 2019) and anti-Asian hate crimes increased in 2020 due to COVID-19 scapegoating (White House, 2021).

This article reports on themes that emerged from qualitative interviews conducted from September 2020 to April 2021 with 19 partners in interracial and interethnic marriages who are raising children ages nine and younger in the United States. The purpose of the interviews was to explore how they navigate as a couple and as parents and what, if any, issues they may face in a racialized society. In exploring themes, care was taken to not look at this family formation through a deficit lens, as is so often the case (Doucet et al., 2019). Given the impact of parental influence when it comes to identity formation and associated behavioral health outcomes for children, it is critical for social workers to understand the experiences and challenges unique to interracial and interethnic parents in raising their children. Implications for social workers working with these families and their young children are included.

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Literature Review

Interracial and Interethnic Marriages

While interracial marriages are much more common today in the United States, interracial and interethnic couples—the parents of biracial, multiracial and bi-ethnic children—still experience stigma that may affect how they raise their children. In one analysis from a national random sample conducted a number of years ago, while acceptance of interracial marriage was increasing, older people were less accepting than were younger people and Whites were less accepting than racial minorities (Garcia et al., 2015). A more recent survey of college students revealed less acceptance of interracial couples than same-race couples (Skinner & Hudac, 2017). Being in a Black-White marriage, the focus of much of the interracial research (e.g. Rauktis et al., 2016), has been linked to less social support (Fusco & Rauktis, 2012) and to lower marital satisfaction (Vasquez et al., 2019), both of which can impede a couple's ability to parent.

Compounding the effects of societal opprobrium, intergenerational family acceptance may not always be forthcoming, which can affect the couple's and their child(ren)'s interactions with parents and grandparents. Djamba and Kimuna (2014) explored attitudes Blacks and Whites held about one of their close relatives marrying outside of their race. Blacks (at 50%) were twice as likely to approve of a White person marrying into their family as were Whites (at 25%) to approve of a close relative marrying a Black person. Receiving support from immediate family for an interracial marriage, while not universally forthcoming according to Greif and Saviet's (2020) research on in-law relationships, can be helpful to the couple in navigating the world as an interracial couple (e.g., Leslie & Letiecq, 2004). In Bell and Hastings's (2015) research with 38 partners in Black-White relationships, most reported parental support while experiencing societal disapproval.

Raising Biracial, Multiracial, and Bi-ethnic Children

Thus, when it comes to raising children in the United States, challenges may exist for these families a priori that same-race couples do not face, despite interracial marriages and biracial people being accepted more than ever (Csizmadia & White, 2019). One challenge is around how parents and children racially identify. Csizmadia and White (2019) note that biracial and multiracial people may choose their identity as one race (most often as a minority), as biracial or multiracial, or as a transcendent racial identity (i.e., not choosing a race). Geographic context can matter. In one study, multiracial children between the ages of 4 and 9 who lived in White communities were more likely to classify pictures of multiracial children as being Black, similar to how White children categorized the pictures but not in keeping with Black children, who were likely to categorize the pictures as multiracial (Roberts & Gelman, 2017).

In their review of the literature on parents' ethnic-racial socialization practices with their children, Hughes et al. (2006) identified four themes from the empirical research, including racial socialization and preparation for bias, cultural socialization, promotion of mistrust, and egalitarianism. Racial socialization refers to minority parents' efforts to protect and prepare their children for dealing with racism. Cultural socialization refers to teaching children about their racial or ethnic history, traditions, language, and food, while instilling pride in their culture. Promotion of mistrust, the third theme, refers to parents cautioning children about other racial groups and, in particular, White people due to racism. This theme appeared in survey-based studies with different ethnic groups. The fourth theme, egalitarianism, refers to valuing all racial and ethnic groups or avoiding discussion of race altogether.

Racial socialization of biracial children requires action on the part of parents. In an analysis of nationally representative survey data from 18,827 kindergarteners in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K), 75% of families of multiracial children (n=467) discussed their ethnic-racial heritage with them at least several times a year, a higher proportion than the families of Black children (70%, n=2694) and White children (43%, n=10,857) (Lesane-Brown et al., 2010). Further, analyzing data from the 293 Black-White biracial children within this sample, Csizmadia et al. (2014) found that those who identified their biracial children as White, as opposed to Black or multiracial, were less likely to have frequent discussions about race.

Discussing racial socialization is not always easy. Rauktis et al. (2016) conducted focus groups with 18 White women married to Black men and learned that many of the women found themselves on "the borders of both whiteness and blackness" (p. 439) and that having a biracial child made their position more tenuous in society. Many mothers, most of whom were single and raising children aged 10 to young adulthood, started parenting believing in a color-blind society but then found that, with racism prevalent, holding such a belief was more questionable. While some mothers wished their children were identified as mixed race, they were often identified as Black. This difference in definition resulted in mothers potentially pushing their children into the same borders of whiteness and blackness with which they struggled.

Biracial and multiracial children often face an additional aspect of identity development if they feel pressured to choose one racial identity or try to pass as one race or

the other depending on the situation (Crawford & Alaggia, 2008). Given that membership in a racial group confers privilege or social marginalization, biracial children, depending on their physical appearance, may be socialized by their parents and society to identify with one race (Rollins & Hunter, 2013). In Rollins and Hunter's (2013) research based on data collected in the early 1990s, 73 mothers of different races raising biracial children (mean age of 12.3) were interviewed about their racial socialization style with their child. Their approaches, which echo what Hughes et al. (2006) discuss, included boosting self-esteem (a promotive parenting approach), educating them about their heritage, preparing them to expect racial discrimination (a protective parenting approach that encouraged the child to be their best), and valuing equity while not assuming others are prejudiced (also a protective style). A few mothers, most notably those of non-Black heritage, took a passive approach, indicating they did little in terms of racial socialization and suggesting that skin color and appearance play a part in the approach.

Confirming the role of the family, Crawford and Alaggia (2008) studied the influences on racial identification among eight Black and White biracial Canadian adults ages 18–29 and found that the family was central. One issue identified was that neither monoracial parent could personally identify with being biracial and the unique stigma that may come along with it. These adult children also internalized racism received from extended family members because of the interracial marriage and wished that their parents had protected them from negative messages.

Other research confirms the role of the family. In a retrospective study interviewing 10 White mothers and 11 of their adult Black-White biracial children raised in the early 1980s through early 2000s, Stone and Dolbin-MacNab (2017) found that racial socialization was an interactive process in these families and explored two themes: creating a biracial family identity and navigating being biracial with the outside world. The mothers proactively discussed their children's racial heritages with them. To understand Black culture and biracial identity better, some of the mothers relied on books, films, acquaintances, and other resources. Several of them elected to live in neighborhoods and have their children attend schools that were more diverse.

While some research has explored the voices of interracial couples and their children, few studies have focused specifically on children in the years predating adolescence (Stone & Dolbin-MacNab, 2017). For example, of the 29 studies on ethnic-racial socialization in children reviewed by Hughes et al. (2006), only 5 (17%) focused primarily on children under 10. In addition, very little attention has focused on raising young bi-ethnic children, i.e., children of Hispanic parents and people who identify as Black, Asian, or White non-Hispanic, nor has attention been paid to Asian-White and Asian-Black marriages (Hughes et al., 2006).

Finally, and of relevance to social workers, research that predated the current political climate—which has included recent hate crimes towards Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and Latinx immigrants, as well as the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020—may not capture what couples and their children are experiencing in the present day. These events may all, individually or cumulatively, affect how parents address the childrearing of multiracial, biracial, and bi-ethnic children. This paper focuses on the experiences of parents in interracial and interethnic marriages raising their children under age 10 during the period between September 2020 and April 2021. By understanding these parents' perspectives on raising their children, social workers will be in a better position to provide services to what may increasingly be an at-risk population.

Methods

Data Collection

Qualitative interviews for this study were conducted as part of a larger mixed-methods research project exploring the experiences of interracial and interethnic married couples. Following online HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) and CITI (Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative) training, as required by the University of Maryland, Baltimore's Institutional Review Board (IRB), 30 Master of Social Work (MSW) students who took an advanced research class in either Fall 2020 or Spring 2021 were instructed on how to administer a consent form, collect survey responses, and conduct a qualitative interview. Each student was required to conduct three semi-structured interviews with individual members of interracial and interethnic couples, primarily via telecommunications technology, such as video conferencing, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While participants in the broader study had to be married, they did not have to have children to participate.

Only one spouse from each couple participated in the research. Participants were sent a consent form and then the survey before they were interviewed. The interview included 12 semi-structured, open-ended questions, three of which specifically centered on children and were only asked of couples with children. The interviews typically took up to an hour to complete. Following the first interview, which the student transcribed, the instructor reviewed the transcript for fidelity to the procedure and interview protocol before subsequent interviews could proceed. Students discussed the meanings they were deriving from the interviews in class, which further sensitized them to the topic and improved their interviewing skills. Students recruited participants from people they knew, people they met through acquaintances, or people recruited from online platforms, such as social media

sites or neighborhood listservs via an IRB approved advertisement. The definitions of race and ethnicity were taken from the U.S. Census Bureau (Livingston & Brown, 2017). Participants self-identified their spouse's and their own race and ethnicity. A code was assigned to each interview, and the corresponding questionnaire responses were compiled into an Excel file with accompanying qualitative interview responses in a Word file.

Interview questions included, "Describe in broad terms what the relationship is like with your spouse. Talk about what the reaction has been to you by family, friends, co-workers, and strangers as a couple," "Describe what impact the interracial status of your marriage has on your family (children, parents, siblings, grandparents, etc.)," and "Describe the benefits or strengths you see from being in an interracial/interethnic family." Those with children were asked additional questions, including: "If you have children, has that had an impact on your relationship with your family or your spouse's family?" and "Describe what it is like for your child(ren) being raised in a home with two or more racial/ethnic identities."

Following Bradley et al.'s (2007) approach, each author separately read the interviews with the 19 participants who were raising children under the age of 10 and identified themes that emerged from the data in a multiple case analysis (Padgett, 2017). The authors then agreed on the common themes to present, re-read the interviews, and grouped the respondents within each theme.

Sample

The 19 participants from the larger study who indicated on the survey that they had at least one child under the age of 10 were included in this analysis. Six couples identified, according to the respondent, as Asian/White, five as Black/White, three as Latinx/White, three as biracial/White, and two as other. Notably, 17 (89%) of the 19 married couples in the sample included a non-Hispanic White person. The interviewees ranged in age from 29 to 46, and fourteen (74%) were female. Ten (53%) of the interviewees were non-Hispanic White people, three were Asian, three were Latinx, two were biracial White and Black, and one was Black. See Table 1 for more details about the demographics of each participant.

Findings

A majority of the 19 interviewees identified at least one theme that emerged from their parenting practices. These were: (1) racism/discrimination, which they saw or were concerned about in reference to their children; (2) the children's ethnic-racial identity development; (3) the children's

skin color; and (4) the benefits to the children of being multiracial, biracial, or bi-ethnic.

Racism/Discrimination

The parents who participated in this study shared their fears for their children's future experiences with racial discrimination, how they were preparing their children for racism and structural oppression in the current social and political climate, and lived experiences of racism or oppression against their children. Several parents reported that their young children were already suffering instances of microaggressions and other racist treatment perpetrated by family members, friends, and strangers, even if they were too young to fully understand.

A common thread among many interracial and interethnic parents, regardless of the racial compositions of their families, was worrying about their children being discriminated against in the future in a number of ways. Mr. K, a biracial father married to a White woman, was concerned about how he would balance protecting his one-year-old son, who has Black heritage, while letting him be a child:

> Black parents have to raise their kids to be safe and White kids can do whatever they want…He is going to be seen as a large, strong, Black man when he is still a boy. How do we set things up so that he can have fun and just be a kid and be safe when this world that we live in won't let him be?

Other interviewees also expressed that they were concerned about potential bias their children may experience in schools, with peers, and among potential mates as they grew up. For example, Ms. N, a White mother married to a Black man, shared a concern echoed by several parents about whether their two children under four would be Black enough or White enough to fit in with monoracial friends. Ms. S, the White mother of two children under four, reported that her Asian husband was concerned that their children may be bullied due to U.S. relations with China.

Given the racism that they anticipated their children would experience, many parents took steps to prepare them. Mr. F, the Black father of a five-year-old boy and 23-year-old girl whose mother is White, reported, "We've had the conversation of me teaching our children what it means to be Black in America and how they're going to be treated differently solely because of that." Other parents of children as young as three expressed their aspirations that their children would be able to comprehend and stand up to racist actions and remarks, and many mentioned they were already consciously boosting their children's confidence about their racial and ethnic identities to arm them against future discrimination.

Table 1 Select family demographics of study participants

Interviewee identifier	Interviewee gender	Interviewee race	Interviewee age	Interviewee education (years)	Spouse gender	Spouse race	Spouse age	Spouse education (years)	Child 1	Child 2	Child 3	Child 4
Ms. A	Female	Asian	44	20	Male	White	50	20	13 yo boy	9 yo boy		
Ms. B	Female	Asian	44	18	Male	White	45	18	12 yo boy	9 yo girl		
Mr. C	Male	Latinx	39	16	Female	White	34	16	9 yo boy			
Ms. D	Female	White and African American	29	18	Male	White and Latinx	33	15	3 yo boy			
Ms. E	Female	White	32	17	Male	African American	31	16	1 yo girl			
Mr. F	Male	African American	45	12	Female	White	44	14	23 yo girl	5 yo boy		
Ms. G	Female	Latinx	35	14	Male	Asian	32	16	5 yo girl	0.25 yo girl		
Ms. H	Female	White	34	16	Male	African American	37	16	3 yo girl			
Ms. I	Female	Latinx	35	17	Male	White	36	16	6 yo girl			
Ms. J	Female	White	41	19	Male	Asian	42	18	6 yo boy	4 yo boy		
Mr. K	Male	White and African American	43		Female	White	43		1 yo boy			
Ms. L	Female	White	36	16	Male	Latinx	33	12	3 yo girl			
Ms. M	Female	White	34	18	Male	Asian	33	18	2 yo girl			
Ms. N	Female	White	39	16	Male	African American	49	16	3.5 yo boy	1 yo girl		
Ms. O	Female	White	29	16	Male	African American	32	16	2 yo boy			
Mr. P	Male	White	34	16	Female	White, African American and Latinx	33	16	8 yo boy	6 yo girl	4 yo boy	1 yo boy
Ms. Q	Female	Asian	46	16	Male	White	45	18	8 yo boy			
Mr. R	Male	White	38	18	Female	African American and Latinx	33	18	4 yo boy	2 yo boy	0.5 yo boy	
Ms. S	Female	White	35	22	Male	Asian	37	26	3.5 yo boy	1.5 yo boy		

The political climate provided opportunities for some parents of elementary school age children to discuss racism as it pertained to current events. For example, Ms. Q, an Asian mother married to a White man, used politics as a jumping off point to speak with her seven-year-old about racism:

In the last year, it's been really important. We talk about racial issues more. We're reading more and watching webinars on how to talk about race. We try to see how much to share. Like, Trump's saying, "China virus." We explain why we don't call it that. I want him to know right from wrong.

Parents of children as young as six reported having conversations about systemic racism. Resources like articles and webinars provided parents who sought them out with guidance on talking about racial issues with their children.

Several parents mentioned direct experiences that their children were already having with microaggressions. For example, Ms. A, an Asian mother married to a White man with two children ages 9 and 13, felt that her children were already the subject of discriminatory treatment in public places. "My children were scolded in stores and restaurants in ways that a White woman's kids never would be," she said.

Some parents capitalized on inappropriate comments to spark conversations around race, particularly among older children. Ms. B, an Asian mother married to a White man, said that some of their friends made racist jokes directed at her nine-year-old daughter: "They make Asian jokes and be culturally insensitive. One of my husband's friends calls my daughter in a stereotypically Chinese accent, and she doesn't know what it means." Ms. B said she responds by "really just communicating with my kids about it. I had to say that (using an accent) is inappropriate. I don't want to over talk it, but I also don't want to under talk it." Rather than attempting to avoid these uncomfortable encounters, Ms. B used them as teachable moments to talk about race and racism.

Also noted in this theme is a concern about the present racially charged political climate in the U.S. A few parents referenced issues between the U.S. and China and concerns with growing up as a Black man and being safe.

Grandparents

Eleven of the interviewees mentioned friction or differences between themselves and/or their spouses with their child(ren)'s grandparents, some of which were due to grandparents exhibiting racism or seeming to harbor racist thoughts against the child(ren). Five interviewees suggested that their child(ren)'s grandparents were biased or discriminated against them, sometimes unwittingly. For example, Ms. E, a White mother married to a Black man, implied that her parents' concern about racism against their

one-year-old bordered on being racist. She said they were worried "mainly about her experiencing racism, which is ironic since they often downplay the racism that my spouse experiences. They were concerned about other people's opinions about our daughter being biracial, but they bring it up more than anyone else."

Some interviewees stayed away from family members who displayed racism toward their children, while others ignored microaggressions in order to stay connected to elders. According to Mr. P, a White father married to a multiracial woman:

It was very surprising to see how much distance we needed to have from my family. Comments about minimizing racial issues in culture and family, extreme defensiveness when calling out racist comments, and inability to see the racial identity of grandkids. Microaggressions would be taking the initiative to teach the children about race, and mostly having the answers wrong, saying things like, "You're acting White" to my wife because she's acting educated or acting smart.

Mr. P. felt that his father and uncles were offended by the change in his identity upon becoming a father to part-Latinx children. He reacted by severely limiting contact with that side of his family.

In contrast, for some parents, microaggressions and differences of opinion that may come up in their extended family should be tolerated. According to Ms. G, a Latinx mother married to an Asian man: "The thing is not making a big to do about when we get treated differently," she said. "We still want the children to respect the grandmas and aunts and uncles…We don't have to fight every single battle." For her, the value of closeness among the extended family and respecting one another was important, while meanwhile she armed her daughters with an appreciation of diversity, helped them become comfortable with their racial and ethnic identities, and gave them autonomy when it came to which aspects of their cultures to embrace, such as whether they wanted to learn Vietnamese.

A few placed comments within the current racial climate. For example, Ms. I related, "There will be times we have to say that we love them (the grandparents) and respect them but we do things differently. This comes up around politics and connections to race." Here again, staying close to extended family trumped issues around race.

Grandparents are not always a source of conflict. Nine participants expressed that having children brought grandparents and extended family closer, with some of these nine indicating that grandparents were proud to have biracial grandchildren. For example, according to Ms. A:

In a way, they are proud that their grandkids look so different from them. When my fair-skinned kid was

born with blue eyes and blond hair, my mother would want to wake the baby up to see her blue eyes. And my mother-in-law likes to take pictures of brown and white hands together. It doesn't always make me comfortable, but that's how it is.

In this family, both the Asian and White grandmothers found ways to celebrate their grandchildren's unique racial identities.

Several parents echoed the general feeling that having grandchildren brought their extended family members closer together. Ms. L, a white mother who has a three-year-old daughter with her Latinx husband, summarized this sentiment well. "Everyone wants to get to know her and be close to her. And so that's brought us closer together," she said. For many of these families, racial differences did not present a hurdle to extended family members' relationships with grandchildren.

Ethnic-Racial Identity Development

Parents discussed the age at which their children began to notice ethnic, racial, and cultural differences; how they tried to facilitate ethnic-racial identity development through exposure to media and their roots; the role of social interactions with family in identity development; and questions of how children represent their ethnic-racial identities to the world.

At three-years-of-age was when several parents reported they saw the first evidence that their child was aware of differences, though this came in simple forms like being aware of variations in languages, connections to other countries, or skin color. For example, Ms. N's three-year-old expressed the beginnings of racial awareness in the form of attempts to accurately depict his skin color: "Our son is starting to make some connections between how he looks," Ms. N said. "If he's making a self-portrait, he doesn't want the white crayon, and he doesn't want the black crayon. He wants some sort of brown crayon." Ms. L said the beginning of her three-year-old daughter's recognition of differences centered on language and extended family: "She's starting to notice people's differences," she said. "She's navigating Spanish versus English. Sometimes she wants Spanish, sometimes English. She knows she has cousins in Guatemala, but I don't think there's a *real* acknowledgement of those differences at this stage yet." While young children demonstrated that they noticed differences, their parents acknowledged that they did not yet have a fuller understanding of the meanings associated with variability in language, race, ethnicity, and nationality.

Even for children too young to understand racial differences, many parents took steps to assist with identity development. For example, they utilized books, television shows, traditional stories, and maps to expose their children to their ethnic and/or racial backgrounds. For example, as Ms. S explained, "We have books with different kinds of people in them that are written in English and books that are written in Chinese." Meaningful places and cultural events also provided fodder for identity development, according to Ms. G: "We take her to places where she can experience Latin heritage. We'll take her to the museums when there's an exhibit about anything cultural." For many parents, deliberately exposing their children to content reflecting their ethnic-racial identities was an important part of their ethnic-racial socialization practices.

Spending time with extended family and peers also influenced children's ethnic-racial identities. For example, Mr. P said: "As the children spend time with their Latino family members, they more strongly identify with that part of them that is most often forgotten." Peers exerted more influence as children grew up, and one mother acknowledged that her older child was learning about race and ethnicity from stereotypes and jokes shared in school.

Some parents initiated conversations with their children under the age of 10 about ethnic-racial identity, whereas others were waiting for their children to start the conversation when they were older. Mr. R, a White father who has three children under the age of five, said, "In terms of 'Why is mommy brown and you're not,' we haven't had them ask that yet. I'm sure that's going to come up." Other parents also indicated that they were waiting for their children to bring up topics related to race and ethnicity before delving into conversations about it.

As children grew older and began to develop their own identities, some did not identify as biracial, multiracial, or bi-ethnic, instead sticking with one aspect of their race or ethnicity. For example, Ms. B's two children, ages 9 and 12, defined themselves differently:

My son identifies more with his Asian heritage and my daughter identifies more with her White heritage, which is interesting because we raised them similarly. They don't view themselves as biracial. I am curious when they get older how they are going to fill out those forms to check off identity.

In the case of Ms. B's family, ethnic-racial identity varied by child despite having the same parents.

In some cases, families with children who could pass as one race or ethnicity were less likely or took longer to identify their children as biracial, bi-ethnic, or multiracial. For example, for Mr. P, whose children can pass as White, coming to appreciate their Latinx identity was a recent phenomenon.

I ignored the Latino identity of my children was not as fully expressed as their other racial identity because of the majority culture we live in. This was a struggle for my wife, who was working hard to teach the children

about their Latino identity. This is part of their identity; they're not just part of this White family.

The fact that in most cases neither parent fully shared the same ethnic-racial identity with their child(ren) may have contributed to some children being identified by just one aspect of their ethnicity or race.

Skin Color

Related to ethnic-racial identity is the way that parents discussed the skin color of their children. Issues that arose included the early recognition of skin color differences, the racial presentation of the children, and comparing racial presentation with family members.

Some parents tried to help their children understand skin color differences from a young age. Ms. H, a White mother, married to a Black man, of a three-year-old girl, was among several parents who said they actively discuss skin color with their young children: "We talk about different skin colors. I'm pink, daddy is dark brown, she is light brown, but both my spouse and I have lots in common." As discussed in the section on ethnic-racial identity development, several parents said that skin color differences were one of the first things related to race that children noticed.

Many parents felt that others would identify their children as one race and not as mixed race. Six parents commented that their children could "pass" as White, whereas others discussed their children presenting primarily as other races. For example, according to Mr. F: "Our kids are not racially ambiguous or whatever you all call it now. If you were to see them on the street, you would automatically assume they were Black." Several parents acknowledged that having lighter skin would confer social advantages in both the United States and their countries of heritage. Ms. G was one of several parents who noted skin color hierarchy in their cultures. "Color is a big thing in Vietnam—the lighter you are, the more prestige you have, the more rank you have in society." In contradistinction, Ms. D noted that in some social situations, children may be at a disadvantage having skin that is too light. "I'm prepared to help him through those moments where it's somebody that he is not black enough," she said. Several parents expressed concern that their children would not be dark or light enough for certain friends as they grew up.

Several of the parents had concerns about skin color differences within the family. According to Ms. A:

> For my kids, that is the most difficult part of being a biracial family. One presents as brown and one presents as White. My son identifies as a person of color. My fair-skinned child doesn't identify at all. There are times when I think maybe he should [identify].

Issues also arose due to differences in skin color between the parents and children. A few parents noted that their skin colors are so different from their children that they have been misidentified as not related. According to Ms. B, "My children look more Filipino than White. My husband is very white, so he jokes that he probably looks like a saint that adopted these Asian children." Other parents mentioned being mistaken as a nanny or caretaker for their own child(ren).

Benefits of Being Multiracial, Biracial, or Bi-ethnic

Parents also identified strengths of hailing from an interracial or interethnic family. These included their children being open-minded in terms of multiculturalism, having the ability to express empathy toward others, and holding egalitarian, anti-racist beliefs.

Several parents discussed how identifying with two different cultures would make their children more worldly. For example, Ms. O, a White mother married to a Black man, reflected on their two-year-old son being multicultural. "I think it will make him very open to different ethnicities, travel, and different approaches to things. Hopefully, he will combine them for the better." Mr. C added that being part of two cultures would help his son when encountering new cultures. "Being able to navigate two cultures is eye opening and helps navigate a third and a fourth culture…be more receptive to others as opposed to being the ugly American that goes somewhere and expects everyone to speak English." Other parents echoed this view that being biracial or bi-ethnic would help their children better navigate novel cultural differences they would encounter in the future.

Several parents mentioned that having two different cultures confers some advantages in understanding other people's unique backgrounds and situations. For example, Mr. P expressed: "Being in an interracial family creates new dimensions of empathy we would not have without being in the family we are in. Our children understand people that are different from them much easier." Ms. G drew an analogy between being multilingual and biracial:

> In research that I've read about, they always talk about the benefits of being multilingual. Understanding multiple languages and the effect that that has on your brain. If language can create that, then experiences of being biracial can create that. It comes back to understanding other identities or experiences. If she gets to experience two, she'll be more well-rounded.

Several of the interviewees shared Ms. G's hope that their children would be better able to relate to other people's experiences as a result of coming from interracial and interethnic families.

Several parents reflected that their children were more likely to be accepting of people from all races and ethnicities. Ms. N hopes that being biracial will help her children see that race does not dictate their futures. Ms. D said of her three-year-old, "I want him to learn that White doesn't always have to come first." Similarly, several other participants expressed that being biracial, multiracial, or bi-ethnic would help their children approach the world with an anti-racist lens.

Discussion

The findings from this study are largely consistent with the themes from the literature. Taken together, the experience of encountering racism in some form for these parents as individuals and as a family is suggested by, for example, Garcia et al. (2015), Djamba and Kimuna (2014), Rauktis et al. (2016) and Skinner and Hudac (2017). These parents' approaches to raising their children are reflective of themes uncovered in the literature review by Hughes et al. (2006) on parents' ethnic-racial socialization, with some distinctions. When it came to preparing their children for bias, parents of some of the younger children were cautiously planning how to have difficult conversations with their children while trying to expose them to as many positive representations of diversity as they could. This was consistent with the assertion in Hughes et al. that "whereas cultural socialization or egalitarian messages may be transmitted when children are quite young, discussion of more complex social processes, such as discrimination or wariness of other groups, may not emerge until children reach middle childhood or adolescence" (2006, p. 758). This study gives a glimpse into what parents are thinking as it pertains to preparing their children for a racially stratified society from a very young age, even before their children are ready to have those conversations. While most of the parents were preparing their children by exposing them to a variety of media, a few were actively discussing discrimination, which may be a reflection of current events and the racially charged political climate.

While Hughes et al. (2006) identified promotion of mistrust as one of the themes across their literature review, in this study, none of the parents discussed promoting mistrust of other racial and ethnic groups with their children. Given that most of the couples in this sample included a non-Hispanic White person, warning their part-White children against people of another race and, specifically, against White people would likely be counter to both the views of the adults and the healthy development of the children. Egalitarianism was a value that came up in many of the interviews, with most of the interviewees likely to discuss the importance of valuing all groups equally, though one parent,

Mr. C, mentioned not wanting to talk about biracial identity to avoid "othering" his child.

These interviews can also be considered in light of Rollins and Hunter's (2013) study on mothers of biracial adolescents, which focused on promotive and protective ethnic-racial socialization, as the parents in this study struggle with how and whether to prepare their young children for potential discrimination. Passive ethnic-racial socialization, which involves not speaking directly about race or ethnicity, also would describe a few parents' approaches. While most of the interviewees mentioned ways that they planned to support their children's identity development, a few had not directly delivered race- and ethnicity-related messages to their children. However, with 10 of the 19 families in the sample not having African American ancestry, this may not be surprising. Csizmadia et al. (2014) found that parents who identified their biracial children as White were less likely to engage in frequent ethnic-racial socialization with their children. Some parents of children who, based on their skin color, could pass as White seemed to have the "privilege" to choose whether to discuss race actively. The fact that most interviewees were considering ways to prepare their children for bias is a positive sign in light of the benefits found from ethnic-racial socialization for biracial children when it was discussed by their families (Crawford & Alaggia, 2008; Hughes et al., 2006). A few parents mentioned that many of these racially and ethnically charged issues that might have simmered on a backburner in previous times became more necessary to address given the social justice climate around race at the time of the interviews.

Parents also described the benefits of being biracial, including increased empathy and a greater awareness of egalitarianism in their children (e.g., Rollins & Hunter, 2013). These benefits have a long history of being promoted by parents and are not new to this sample (e.g., Stone & Dolbin-MacNab, 2017).

Implications for Social Work

With the growing prevalence of interracial and interethnic marriages, social workers are increasingly likely to come across parents and children where issues around racial and ethnic identity need to be addressed as the presenting problem or related to the presenting problem. The following clinical implications for social work practice emerged from these interviews, the application of which will vary by the racial, ethnic, and cultural makeup of the family and other contextual factors.

First, social workers need to help family members deal openly with racism and microaggressions that they might experience from relatives, friends, and strangers. Each married couple in this sample includes a member of a racial or

ethnic group that has been a "target" in the last few years, be they of African American, Latinx, or Asian descent. While this sample is more highly educated than the typical U.S. family, Boyd-Franklin (2003) advises that, "We cannot pretend that…racial issues are not part of the treatment process or that they disappear as an African American family moves up the socioeconomic ladder" (p. 331). By asking for and listening to experiences about difference within the family and between the family and others, social workers can help the family feel comfortable exploring difference in the clinical space. Practicing how to respond in the session, even working on scripts to use, can help family members anticipate what they may want to confront. Silence on the part of the family, as Rollins (2019) notes, may be an attempt to avoid the pain of discrimination. Social workers need to offer the opportunity to discuss that pain.

Second, as the racial and ethnic identities of children are paramount to their development, social workers need to explore the racial and ethnic identities of parents, as their identities will influence the children's upbringing and their self-perception. Doucet et al. (2019) describe the great variation in how parents of color were raised and in how they might identify racially and ethnically. Those identities might shift once married to someone who is different racially or ethnically from them. White people also have histories of privilege in racial identification. These identities shift with marriage, as Rauktis et al. (2016) describe the in-between spaces in which White women married to Black men come to live.

Parents of mixed-race children may have to stretch themselves in order to understand the dynamics within their own racial identification, how that identification interacts with their spouse, and how, individually and as a couple, they will raise a biracial, multiracial, or bi-ethnic child. This can be a reach for a parent who is not biracial or bi-ethnic (Rauktis et al., 2016). They will have to figure out how to approach it. For parents in biracial families, open communication, as Rollins (2019) states, "…fosters racial awareness, reduces inconsistent messages, minimizes ambiguity, increases familial interaction, and decreases the effects of conflictual messages" (p. 165). This would include discussion of skin color and the potential differences in children's appearance, as was mentioned within this sample. Social workers feeling comfortable having an open discussion about racism is a metaphor for how parents may choose to talk with their children. At the same time, not all cultures are comfortable with open communication.

A variety of media, such as books, television shows, and museum exhibitions, are being employed by parents to teach their children about difference as well as to celebrate it, often by connecting children with their heritage. This is a promotive approach as described by Rollins and Hunter (2013). Social workers can help parents by staying up-to-date, a process suggested by Cole and Valentine (2000), with such resources and by displaying them openly in their offices.

The age of a child at which discussions of skin color and identity are raised in the family will differ greatly by the developmental stage of the child and the racial and ethnic context of the family. Clearly, some parents in our sample felt a greater need to have these discussions earlier than others based, in part, on their heritage. Doucet et al. (2019) advise parents to "get on the same page" in terms of messaging about being biracial. Nuttgens (2010) describes a White family who adopted a biracial Aboriginal and White child and educated her specifically about her Aboriginal identity. Social workers can help lead such a discussion, one that would be consistent with Structural Family Therapy in which boundaries around the parental subsystem are an important component of healthy family functioning (e.g., Nichols & Davis, 2021). This would mean working with the parents to clarify how they want to present ethnic-racial identity development to their children and understanding that the racialized histories of the parents will be primary. Parents of many children who were part Asian and part Latinx reported that their children can "pass" as White, giving them more options than other biracial children in the study. Individualizing treatment based on the parents' perceptions of their children, their racial and ethnic backgrounds, and their connection to their own heritage would be key.

Third, confronting relatives who parents feel are acting insensitively towards their children is a matter of balance. Mr. P, a White father pulls away emotionally, while Ms. G, a Latinx mother married to an Asian man, maintains the relationship. The literature suggests that racist messages and microaggressions on the part of extended family members cause long-lasting harm to children when not stopped by their parents (Crawford & Alaggia, 2008). While open communication with parents and parents-in-law is one suggested way of approaching microaggressions from the older generation (e.g., Greif & Saviet, 2020), Knudson-Martin et al. (2019) suggest a socioculturally attuned approach to the family. Here again, the differences within our sample have to be appreciated. The parents are embedded in a society that may favor one gender, race, or ethnicity over the other. These characteristics affect the equity and power (Knudson-Martin et al., 2019) within the family but also affect how the family relates to other family members, who are also embedded in society, as well as with the broader society where, again, skin color and heritage matter. For example, some research shows that White women are more likely to be socially penalized for marrying outside of their race than Black women or men (Stillwell & Lowery, 2020). Thus, and consistent with Doucet et al.'s (2019) recommendation to explore the family's intersectionality, a one-size-fits-all approach on the part of social workers is not recommended.

Fourth, parents in this study talked about the benefits of being in an interracial or interethnic marriage and having biracial, multiracial, or bi-ethnic children. These parents chose their marital partner and thus, most likely, gave thought to what raising a biracial, multiracial, or bi-ethnic child might mean. This is fertile ground for discussion. Focusing on the strengths that dwell within these families and their future generations while also acknowledging the challenges can be an important, forward-looking intervention that can potentially open a pathway for the parents to have conversations with their children.

Fifth, social workers must practice with cultural humility and model it for the family. Franco and McElroy-Hetzel (2019) define cultural humility as a position of being with a client that shows respect and lacks superiority in relation to the client's experience and cultural background. While Schools of Social Work require content focusing on racism and diversity, and while state licensing boards are increasingly requiring CEUs for license retention, events in the news can challenge past education. Personal reflection on a daily basis is necessary for awareness of biases and beliefs (Sue & Sue, 2016). The growing population of interracial and interethnic families presents unique challenges for families unaccustomed to difference within their family as well as to social workers.

Cultural humility is also important for parents in relation to their own children, as suggested by Franco and McElroy-Hetzel (2019). Parents may need support in being open to the experiences of a child who may appear different from them and who may be struggling to choose an identity that is similar to only one parent or wholly different from both parents (Csizmadia & White, 2019).

By being aware of their own feelings, social workers model for parents. This is particularly important given the temporal nature of race relations in the U.S. Parents in this sample describe their heightened awareness of difference under a Trump presidency, during and following the racial protests of 2020, as well as in the midst of an increase in anti-Asian and anti-Latinx hate crimes. Social workers must remain sensitive to this rapidly changing landscape as it affects clients.

Finally, social work educators must emphasize the importance of staying current in local, national, and international affairs to understand what events may affect clients' feelings of safety in society. This education should include literacy about how to interpret news about political and protest matters for themselves and for their clients, particularly when the news involves racial or ethnic issues, for example around immigration. As Parrish (2021) noted in writing about the COVID-19 pandemic, though it also applies to racial matters, "It is concerning to see the ways in which large proportions of our society have clung to far-fetched conspiracy theories and pseudoscience…" (p. 2). A critical eye is needed when trying to verify what is heard and read from a variety of sources.

Limitations

Limitations of the study include the nature of the sample, its size, and the fact that information was gathered at one point in time. Family relationships are dynamic and children in the sample were young, so developmental changes over time may not have been captured. Though there were similarities with other research findings, it is difficult to know about the level of intensity that accompanied this particular time in U.S. history. Further, the research team relied primarily, though not exclusively, on personal contacts. In cases where participants knew the interviewer, they may have given more socially desirable responses that might understate the extent of any struggles they and their spouse were experiencing or their children were experiencing. In cases where the advertisement for participants was shared via listservs, the participants self-selected based on their interest in participating in the research. These self-identified participants may be more attuned to issues of race and ethnicity and thus prone to have stronger opinions about how they want to engage in ethnic-racial socialization with their children than the broader population of people in interracial and interethnic marriages who social workers may also see. Their responses may have skewed the results away from passive ethnic-racial socialization. In addition, the sample was largely based around east coast metropolitan areas, which are more diverse than other regions of the country and thus may understate issues that other parents in interracial and interethnic marriages may experience in less diverse regions of the country. Also, the educational level of the sample was higher than the national average (U.S. Census, 2020, Table 1), and all participants were married. These two key variables, both related to financial well-being, suggest greater resources to deal with raising a multiracial child than is found in the literature (e.g., Rauktis et al., 2016) and the general population. Finally, multiple researchers conducted interviews. Even though all received the same training, the interpretation and asking of the questions may have differed from one interviewer to the next.

Conclusion

This study identified similarities in the parenting practices and thoughts expressed by 19 interviewees in interracial and interethnic marriages with biracial, multiracial, and bi-ethnic children under 10, regardless of their specific racial or ethnic backgrounds. Future research could compare the themes gathered through this study across races and ethnicities of

the parents. This could help ascertain whether parents of the Black-White biracial children included in this study are more likely to engage in protective or promotive racial socialization (as opposed to passive racial socialization—silence) than the parents of the other biracial, multiracial, and bi-ethnic children (Rollins, 2019). It would be important to compare trends across parents of children under 10, versus older children and young adults. In addition, further research on how new grandparents navigate having biracial, multiracial, or bi-ethnic children join the family is warranted. This could be helpful to social workers in the development of novel multigenerational interventions to facilitate productive and positive intergenerational relationships among interracial and interethnic families to help their children.

Declarations

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