

## Ethnic Differences in Women's Emotional Reactions to Parental Nonsupportive Emotion Socialization

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### **Abstract:**

Recent evidence suggests that the association between parents' use of nonsupportive emotion socialization practices and their children's subsequent negative emotional outcomes varies based on ethnicity. The goal of this study is to test the proposition that African American women interpret parental nonsupportive emotion socialization practices less negatively than European American women. In this study, 251 European and African American women completed a measure on recalled feelings when their parents engaged in nonsupportive emotion socialization practices during childhood. Results indicated that African American women reported feeling more loved and less hurt and ashamed than European American women when their parents enacted nonsupportive emotion socialization practices such as ignoring, punishing, minimizing, and teasing them when distressed. Possible mechanisms for this difference and the need for additional research exploring ethnic differences in emotion socialization and its effects on adjustment are discussed.

**Keywords:** affect | emotion socialization | ethnic differences

### **Article:**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Parental emotion socialization is defined as the set of practices parents use to teach their children about the causes and consequences of emotions, the appropriate display of emotions, and how to regulate emotions effectively (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). Prior research has consistently demonstrated that parents' use of nonsupportive emotion socialization practices, such as punishing the child for being upset or discouraging the expression of negative emotions,

is linked with negative outcomes such as internalizing and externalizing symptoms (for reviews see Eisenberg et al., 1998; Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007; Thompson & Meyers, 2007). However, accumulating recent evidence suggests that the association between parents' use of nonsupportive emotion socialization practices and their children's subsequent negative emotional outcomes varies based on ethnicity. That is, parental nonsupportive emotion socialization appears to have a greater negative effect on European American than African American children, adolescents, and adults (Leerkes, Supple, Su, & Cavanaugh, 2013; Montague, Magai, Consedine, & Gillespie, 2003; Nelson et al., 2012; Vendlinski, Silk, Shaw, & Lane, 2006). Although the mechanisms that explain this difference have yet to be tested, it has been proposed that African Americans may interpret and experience nonsupportive emotion socialization less negatively than European Americans, which may protect them from the negative effects of this type of emotion socialization on well-being (Leerkes et al., 2013; Montague et al., 2003; Vendlinski et al., 2006). The primary goal of this study is to directly test the proposition that African American women interpret nonsupportive emotion socialization less negatively as indexed by greater remembered negative emotional reactions to these practices compared to European American women.

In this study, we focus on four nonsupportive emotion socialization practices that have been included across a number of prior studies: (1) *minimizing*, which includes telling a child not to over-react or to be upset; (2) *punishment*, which includes scolding or disciplining a child for being upset; (3) *teasing*, which includes calling a child names or ridiculing them for being upset; and (4) *ignoring* a child when upset (Fabes, Poulin, Eisenberg, & Madden-Derdich, 2002; Klimes-Dougan et al., 2007; Leerkes & Siepak, 2006). Each of these practices serves the apparent goal of coercing children to suppress or reduce their display of negative emotions in the moment with little attention to the long-term implications for children's autonomous regulation of emotions. These nonsupportive emotion socialization practices may reflect a coercive emotional control style, that parallels coercive behavioral control (Baumrind, 2013), and may be particularly likely among authoritarian parents (Morris, Cui, & Steinberg, 2013). In contrast, supportive emotion socialization practices, such as simultaneously encouraging children to express their emotions appropriately and helping them cope with the underlying problem, may reflect confrontative (i.e., noncoercive) emotional control in that these practices appear reasoned and serve the long-term goal of autonomous emotion regulation (Baumrind, 2013); such practices may be particularly likely among authoritative parents (Morris et al., 2013).

It has been argued that nonsupportive emotion socialization practices heighten children's negative emotions and teach children to avoid rather than understand and cope with their distress which undermines the development of adaptive emotion regulation and contributes to subsequent problems such as externalizing (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Morris et al., 2007). Further, children may interpret these behaviors as hostile or critical of them, which may undermine their sense of self and contribute depressive symptoms (Morris et al., 2007; Thompson & Meyer, 2007). Prior research has supported these views in that nonsupportive emotion socialization has consistently

been linked with negative outcomes such as heightened internalizing and externalizing symptoms, emotion dysregulation, and avoidant coping (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy, 1996; Garside & Klimes-Dougan, 2002; Hastings et al., 2008; Klimes-Dougan et al., 2007; O'Neal & Magai, 2005). Importantly, with the exception of the study by O'Neal and Magai (2005), these studies have been composed of primarily European American participants.

However, in four recent studies in which ethnicity was examined as a moderator of the effect of nonsupportive practices on social-emotional outcomes a different pattern was apparent among African American families (Leerkes et al., 2013; Montague et al., 2003; Nelson et al., 2012; Vendlinski et al., 2006). Specifically, the association between remembered punitive emotion socialization in childhood and fearful/preoccupied adult attachment was significantly stronger for European American adults than African American adults (Montague et al., 2003), and remembered parental emotion minimization in childhood was linked with elevated depressive symptoms for European American women but not African American women (Leerkes et al., 2013). Similarly, low mother-child openness, indexed by mothers' reports of low levels of child emotion sharing and comfort seeking from the mother as well as low levels of trust in and reliance on the mother, was associated with depressive symptoms for European American children but not African American children (Vendlinski et al., 2006). Finally, African American children whose mothers encouraged them not to express their negative emotions were rated higher on social-emotional competence by their teachers; this association was not apparent for European American children (Nelson et al., 2012). The latter result suggests that some forms of nonsupportive emotion socialization may be adaptive for African American children.

In the aforementioned studies, the authors suggested a variety of mechanisms that may explain these differences. They proposed that the appropriateness and hence effect of parents' nonsupportive emotion socialization on children's subsequent emotional adjustment varies by ethnicity because of different sociocultural experiences and expectations (Cole & Tan, 2007; Ogbu, 1981). Specifically, nonsupportive emotion socialization is more normative in African American families (Halberstadt, Craig, Lozada, & Brown, 2011; Leerkes & Siepak, 2006; Montague et al., 2003; Nelson et al., 2012) and may be a deliberate effort to teach children to minimize their emotions in an effort to protect them from racism (Garrett-Peters et al., 2008, 2011; Nelson et al., 2012). If African American children accurately perceive that their parents engage in nonsupportive responses to their negative emotions in an effort to protect them from discrimination (by recognizing that the expression of negative emotions may be interpreted negatively by European Americans), they may view this as evidence of their parents' love and concern, a feeling that should be reinforced by the within-group normativeness of this behavior. In contrast, given the different cultural context and within-group non-normativeness, European American children may perceive nonsupportive emotion socialization practices as evidence that their parents did not understand, validate, or care about their emotions, which may elicit shame and hurt feelings (Leerkes et al., 2013; Montague et al., 2003; Vendlinski et al., 2006).

In this study, we directly tested the latter possibility. That is, we examined ethnic differences in the extent to which adult women recalled feeling loved, hurt, and ashamed when their parents engaged in nonsupportive emotion socialization practices during childhood. We modeled the study after a study conducted by Mason, Walker-Barnes, Tu, Simons, and Martinez-Arrue (2004), who examined ethnic group differences in children's affective response to their parents' psychological and behavioral control practices. They found that African American adolescents were significantly more likely than European American adolescents to report feeling loved when their parents engaged in highly controlling behaviors. Based on their results and prior theorizing regarding emotion socialization, we hypothesized that African American women would recall feeling more loved and less hurt and ashamed when their parents engaged in each of the four nonsupportive emotion socialization practices in childhood than European American women. Although we suspect a similar pattern would occur among men, our study is limited to women participating in a longitudinal study during the transition to parenthood. Thus, the current sample is a sample of convenience with regard to the current question, but a strength of capitalizing on this sample is that a nearly equal number of African American and European American women participated.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

Participants were 259 pregnant women, expecting their first child, who were participating in a larger study on the origins of maternal sensitivity. Eight women who self-identified as both African American and European American were removed from the analytic sample given the goals of this study. This resulted in an analytic sample of 251 women of whom 128 were European American and 123 were African American. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 44 years ( $M = 25$  years). Twenty-seven percent had a high school diploma or less, 27% had some college, and 46% had a 4-year college degree or beyond. Most were married or living with their child's father (57%), 24% were in a relationship but not living with their child's father, and 19% were single. Annual family income ranged from less than \$2,000 to over \$100,000; median income was \$35,000.

### **Procedures**

Women were recruited from child birth education classes, breast-feeding classes, local obstetric practices, clinics, and by referrals from other participants via informational flyers or presentations by members of the research team in classes. Over the course of recruitment, the potential participant pool included 2,020 pregnant women. Of those for whom information on ethnicity (1,822) was available, 51% were African American and 49% were European American women. Twenty-nine percent of women (581) in the pool expressed interest in learning more about the study. Of these, 377 met the inclusion criteria of being 18 or older, African American or European American, fluent in English, and expecting their first child and agreed to participate

on the phone. Subsequently, 18 became ineligible because their infants were born before they could complete the prenatal assessment and 100 did not sign the formal consent or complete measures after multiple attempts to contact them, bringing the final prenatal sample to 259 participants, 8 of whom were biracial and thus excluded from this report. Of most importance given the goals of the current study, that our sample was roughly 50% African American and 50% European American maps onto ethnic composition of the recruitment pool and suggests that “interest” in hearing about the study was not confounded with ethnicity. Moreover, ethnicity was not confounded with participation in the study: approximately 14% of European American and 13% of African American women in the participant pool completed the first phase of the study.

Upon enrollment in the study, women were mailed their consent forms and a packet of questionnaires including measures of demographics and remembered emotional responses to parental emotion socialization in childhood. Women returned their completed consent forms and questionnaires to us when they visited our laboratory for an interview. Participants received \$50 and a small gift. All procedures were approved by the university's institutional review board.

## Measures

Participants completed the Affective Meaning Questionnaire (AMQ) before their interview. The AMQ is a new measure designed for this study to assess the way respondents recalled feeling when their parents engaged in four distinct nonsupportive emotion socialization practices during childhood. The AMQ was modeled after a measure created by Mason et al. (2004) to assess the affective meaning adolescents’ prescribed to different parental control practices. In our version, participants were presented with four scenarios reflecting different nonsupportive emotion socialization practices: parents scolded or punished them for being upset (*punished*), laughed at or called them names for being upset (*teased*), told them they were over-reacting or needed to control emotions better when upset (*minimized*), and ignored them when upset (*ignored*). For each scenario, participants rated the extent to which they felt 10 emotions or feelings on a five-point scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *very much* (5) when this occurred during their first 16 years of life. A principal components factor analyses with varimax rotation indicated there were three subscales for each scenario: *loved* (loved, protected, cared for; factor loadings ranged from .81 to .93 across scenarios), *hurt* (hurt, sad, mad; factor loadings ranged from .53 to .89 across scenarios), and *ashamed* (ashamed, guilty, bad; factor loadings ranged from .67 to .91 across scenarios). The 10th item, felt controlled, did not load on any subscales and was considered no further. Scores were calculated by averaging individual items within the three scales for each of the four scenarios resulting in 12 scores; higher scores indicate greater reported feelings of being loved, hurt, and ashamed. Internal consistency reliabilities were calculated separately for African American and European American women and are reported in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics and Results of Univariate ANCOVAs

	<b>Recalled Emotional Reaction</b>					
	<b>Loved</b>		<b>Hurt</b>		<b>Ashamed</b>	
	EA	AA	EA	AA	EA	AA
Parental practice						
Punished						
$\alpha$	.89	.90	.71	.80	.76	.72
$M$	2.14	2.45	3.73	3.71	3.03	2.53
$SE/SD$	.10/.97	.11/1.20	.09/.78	.09/.97	.09/.94	.09/.98
Minimized						
$\alpha$	.72	.76	.89	.85	.83	.84
$M$	1.95	2.11	3.64	3.18	3.25	2.37
$SE/SD$	.09/.87	.09/.99	.10/.96	.10/1.10	.10/1.10	.11/1.11
Teased						
$\alpha$	.90	.84	.83	.84	.77	.76
$M$	1.34	1.67	4.14	3.83	3.35	2.64
$SE/SD$	.08/.62	.08/.94	.09/.86	.10/1.08	.11/1.03	.11/1.16
Ignored						
$\alpha$	.83	.83	.80	.88	.74	.73
$M$	1.48	1.51	4.07	3.83	2.98	2.25
$SE/SD$	.07/.67	.07/.77	.09/.81	.09/1.09	.11/1.05	.11/1.13

Means are estimated marginal means controlling for participant age and education. Partial  $\eta^2$  can be interpreted like  $R^2$  and values of .02, .15, and .35 correspond to small, medium, and large effects, respectively (Richardson, 2011). EA, European American; AA, African American. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

Univariate ANCOVA Results						
	<i>F</i>	$\eta_p^2$	<i>F</i>	$\eta_p^2$	<i>F</i>	$\eta_p^2$
Ethnicity	4.55*	.02	5.74**	.02	35.92**	.13
Practice	7.67**	.03	2.63*	.01	5.23**	.02
Practice × Ethnicity	1.85	.00	1.95	.00	1.90	.00

## RESULTS

### Preliminary Analyses

Missing values were imputed in SPSS version 18 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL) using a fully conditional specification model meaning that missing values on any variable were predicted one at a time from all other variables. All demographic, independent, and dependent variables were included in the imputation model. Imputation is recommended over case-wide deletion to prevent biased results and is appropriate in cases with few missing data (<5%; Acock, 2005), and in these data less than 2% of data were missing overall.

Next, *t*-tests and correlations were calculated to examine the possibility that age and education should be treated as covariates. African American participants were significantly younger ( $M = 23.02$ ; standard deviation [*SD*] = 4.69) and less educated ( $M = 3.22$  [between some college and a 2-year degree];  $SD = 1.58$ ) than European American participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 26.95$ ,  $SD = 5.46$ ;  $M_{\text{education}} = 4.41$  [between a 2- and 4-year college degree];  $SD = 1.82$ ),  $t(248) = 6.12$  and  $5.50$ , respectively, both  $p < .01$ . In addition, age and education correlated with remembered emotional responses to parents' nonsupportive practices emotion socialization practices during childhood such that younger and less educated women generally reported feeling more loved and less hurt and ashamed. Thus, age and education were controlled in subsequent analyses to rule out the possibility that observed ethnic group differences were solely a function of age or education.

### Hypothesis Testing

The hypothesis that there would be ethnic group differences in women's emotional reactions to nonsupportive emotion socialization was tested using a between groups repeated measure multivariate analysis of covariance. Ethnic group was the between subject factor. Socialization practice was the repeated factor as each participant rated their emotional response to four different socialization practices. The three types of emotional response (loved, hurt, and ashamed) were the measures or dependent variables. Finally, age and education were the covariates. This approach was selected because a significant multivariate effect would rule out

the likelihood that any significant univariate differences are merely an artifact of the number of analyses conducted. The full factorial model (including the interaction between ethnic group and practice) was run to consider the possibility that ethnic group differences in emotional reactions may be apparent for some nonsupportive practices but not others. Significant multivariate effects for ethnic group differences in emotional responses were followed by univariate analysis of covariance to examine the extent to which there were ethnic group differences in each of the three emotional reactions.

There was a multivariate effect of ethnic group,  $F(3, 245) = 13.74, p < .001$ , on emotional responses. The multivariate effect for the interaction between ethnic group and practice was not significant,  $F(9, 239) = 1.83, ns$ , indicating that ethnic group differences in emotional reactions did not vary across the four nonsupportive emotion socialization practices. Estimated marginal means controlling for age and education and the results of the univariate analyses testing ethnic group differences in each of the three emotional responses are reported in Table 1 and described below.

There was a significant main effect of ethnic group for all three emotional reaction outcome variables; these were not qualified by interactions with socialization practice. As illustrated in Figure 1, African American women reported feeling significantly more loved and less hurt and ashamed than European American women in response to nonsupportive emotion socialization practices. These differences were consistent with prediction. Notably, the effect of ethnic group was substantially larger for feeling ashamed (partial  $\eta^2 = .13$ ) than for feeling loved (partial  $\eta^2 = .02$ ) or hurt (partial  $\eta^2 = .02$ ) in response to parents' nonsupportive emotion socialization practices during childhood.

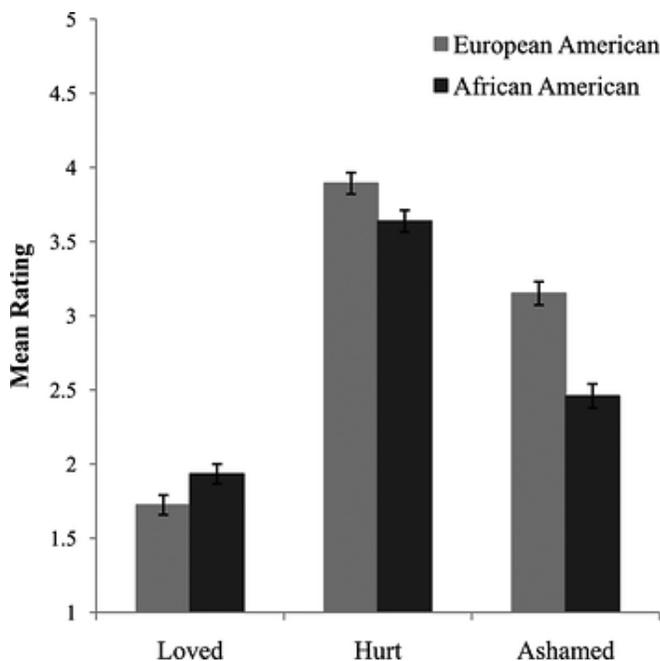


FIGURE 1 Ethnic group differences in recalled emotional reactions to nonsupportive emotion socialization practices.

There was also a multivariate effect for specific nonsupportive practice,  $F(9, 239) = 3.92, p < .001$ , indicating that the extent to which women reported feeling loved, hurt, and ashamed varied depending on the specific practice. Given the goals of the present study, the contrasts for the effect of nonsupportive emotion socialization practice on emotional responses are not presented but are available from the first author upon request.

## DISCUSSION

The primary goal of this study was to examine possible differences in the manner in which African American and European American women recall feeling when their parents engaged in nonsupportive emotion socialization practices during childhood. This task was undertaken in an effort to shed light on mechanisms that may explain previously reported ethnic group differences in the effects of nonsupportive emotion socialization on subsequent emotional well-being.

Consistent with prediction, and parallel to research in the behavioral control literature (Mason et al., 2004), African American women recalled feeling less hurt and ashamed and more loved when their parents engaged in nonsupportive practices than did European American women. This pattern did not vary based on the specific type of nonsupportive practice. It is important to point out, that both groups generally reported that nonsupportive emotion socialization did not make them feel loved and did make them feel hurt (Figure 1), and the difference between groups on these reactions, although significant, were small. The most robust difference was in relation to feelings of shame. Thus, it is not the case the African American women recalled responding positively to these practices but rather they recalled responding somewhat less negatively than European American women. Nevertheless, this pattern supports the view that African American children interpret nonsupportive emotion socialization less negatively than do European American children and may be one mechanism explaining previously reported ethnic group differences in the effects of emotion socialization on child outcomes (Leerkes et al., 2013; Montague et al., 2003; Vendlinski et al., 2006). That the largest group difference was apparent for feeling ashamed may indicate that European Americans are particularly likely to internalize nonsupportive responses to their negative emotions and view them as a negative reflection on themselves. This may explain why ethnic group differences in the effects of nonsupportive emotion socialization have been reported for depressive symptoms and adult attachment preoccupation (reflecting a negative view of self) but not for anger or externalizing symptoms that presumably would stem from heightened feelings of anger and rejection more so than from feelings of shame (Leerkes et al., 2013; Montague et al., 2003; Vendlinski et al., 2006).

Efforts to understand the mechanism by which ethnic group differences in the effects of emotion socialization on well-being exist are important. To our knowledge our study is the first to directly examine ethnic group differences in emotional reactions to parents' nonsupportive emotion

socialization practices. Regardless of the novelty of our approach, the study has important limitations. First, the AMQ is a retrospective measure, and it is possible that intervening time and experiences influence the manner in which adults recollect and report on affectively charged experiences from childhood. On the other hand, how adults currently understand and feel about these childhood experiences may be most central to their current well-being (Montague et al., 2003). Nevertheless, prospective longitudinal research examining ethnic differences in children's and adolescents' emotional responses to concurrent emotion socialization and links with subsequent adjustment in diverse samples is needed before strong causal inferences can be made. Two additional limitations regard gender. That is, given the nature of the larger study, we only addressed these questions in a sample of women. Efforts should be made in future research to determine if a similar pattern of ethnic group differences are apparent for men. Further, in this study, participants were asked to report on how they felt when their parent(s) engaged in specific nonsupportive emotion socialization practices. This may mask differences in how adults recall feeling when their mothers versus their fathers engaged in specific emotion socialization practices in childhood. Finally, the sample was a convenience sample of pregnant women; thus, it is unclear if results would generalize to all women.

In summary, parental nonsupportive emotion socialization has long been viewed as a risk factor for subsequent problems. Our results, coupled with prior research, suggest that the extent to which this is the case likely varies across ethnic groups. African American women appear to recall experiencing their parents' nonsupportive practices less negatively than do European American women as evidenced by their reported emotional reactions. Differences in affective reactions to parental nonsupportive emotion socialization practices may explain, at least partially, why nonsupportive practices appear to be less detrimental for African American women than European American women. These possibilities, and other issues relevant to cultural and ethnic differences in emotion socialization (see Cole & Tan, 2007), warrant further examination.

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