The Promise of Racial and Ethnic Protective Factors in Promoting Ethnic Minority Youth Development

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ABSTRACT—*Experiences of racial and ethnic discrimination pose significant threats to the development and well-being of racial and ethnic minority children. Fortunately, not all youth who experience discrimination are susceptible to its harmful effects. Growing evidence points to several racial and ethnic factors that promote positive youth development and protect against the potentially damaging effects of racial and ethnic adversity. This article summarizes emerging research trends and conclusions regarding the "promotive" and "protective" effects of racial and ethnic identity, ethnic-racial socialization, and cultural orientation, as well as some of the mechanisms that may account for their salutary properties. The article concludes with a brief discussion of important considerations and directions for the future study of racial and ethnic resilience processes in ethnic minority youth.*

KEYWORDS—*discrimination; ethnic identity; racial identity; ethnic socialization; racial socialization; cultural orientation*

More than 10 years into the new millennium, racial and ethnic discrimination continue to pose a significant liability for the healthy development of racial and ethnic minority youth in the United States. For example, large-scale studies indicate that 87% of African American adolescents (Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers, & Jackson, 2008) and 50% of Latinos aged 18–24 (Pérez, Fortuna, & Alegría, 2008) have experienced discrimination in the past year. Community studies also highlight how common these experiences are across diverse groups of ethnic minority youth (e.g., Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Greene, Way, &

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Pahl, 2006) and point to a strong negative association between discrimination and developmental outcomes such as academic achievement (e.g., Benner & Kim, 2009; Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008; Neblett, Chavous, Nguyên, & Sellers, 2009) and socioemotional adjustment (e.g., Brody et al., 2006; Rivas-Drake, Hughes, & Way, 2008; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006).

A recent and promising trend is the identification of protective factors that buffer the association between racial and ethnic discrimination and developmental outcomes. Consistent with scholars' recommendations to study adaptive aspects of culture (García Coll, Akerman, & Cicchetti, 2000) and to consider how culturally informed strengths can serve protective functions for members of ethnic minority groups (Case & Robinson, 2003), we discuss three racial and ethnic factors associated with resilience among ethnic minority youth: (a) racial and ethnic identity, (b) ethnic-racial socialization, and (c) cultural orientation. Because the research literature is moving from the identification of protective factors to understanding how these factors convey their effects, we also identify several potential underlying mechanisms with the hope of guiding future research in this area.

RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

Racial and ethnic identity—or youth's attitudes and behaviors that define the significance and meaning of race and ethnicity in their lives—have both become increasingly recognized as important "promotive" factors in the context of normative development and "protective" factors against the harmful effects of racial and ethnic discrimination. Promotive factors refer to predictors of better outcomes across all levels of risk (e.g., discrimination), while protective factors play a mitigating role when the level of adversity is high (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009). Theoretical formulations of ethnic minority youth development (e.g., García Coll, Crnic, Lamberty, & Wasik, 1996; Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997), as well as empirical studies, support the notion that the positive significance and

meaning that youth ascribe to race and ethnicity promote a broad range of youth developmental outcomes such as identity exploration (e.g., French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006) and self-esteem (Bracey, Bámaca, & Umaña-Taylor, 2004; Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007) and are negatively associated with internalizing (e.g., Juang, Nguyen, & Lin, 2006; McHale et al., 2006; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003) and externalizing symptoms (e.g., Belgrave, Van Oss Marin, & Chambers, 2000; McMahon & Watts, 2002). The dimension of racial and ethnic identity that focuses on positive feelings about group membership—referred to as *ethnic affirmation* in some studies (e.g., Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian, & Bámaca-Gómez, 2004) and *private regard* in others (e.g., Sellers et al., 2006)—is perhaps the most salient promotive factor identified in the literature. A host of studies have linked this dimension of racial and ethnic identity to positive outcomes across Latino (Brook, Whiteman, Balka, Win, & Gursen, 1998; Fuligni, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005; Romero & Roberts, 2003), Black (e.g., Gaylord-Harden, Ragsdale, Mandara, Richards, & Petersen, 2007; Wills et al., 2007), Asian (Mahalingam, Balan, & Haritatos, 2008; Umaña-Taylor & Shin, 2007), American Indian (Kulis, Napoli, & Marsiglia, 2002), and multiethnic (Marsiglia, Kulis, & Hecht, 2001; Marsiglia, Kulis, Hecht, & Sills, 2004; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004) samples of youth.

While these studies have established the promotive effects of racial and ethnic identity, surprisingly few studies have examined the *protective* nature of racial and ethnic identity. Nonetheless, those few studies provide important clues about the significance of racial and ethnic identity in the context of youth's experiences of racial and ethnic discrimination (see Umaña-Taylor, 2011, for a detailed review). In a study of Mexican American adolescents, for example, Romero and Roberts (2003) found that among youth who experienced high levels of ethnic discrimination, those with high ethnic affirmation still reported high levels of self-esteem, while the self-esteem of their counterparts who reported low levels of ethnic affirmation appeared to suffer. Similarly, Wong et al. (2003) found that among African American youth, a positive connection to one's ethnic group moderated the association between racial discrimination and poor academic achievement and problem behaviors. Recent studies demonstrate the promotive effects of perceptions of others' evaluations of one's racial or ethnic group (i.e., *public regard;* Rivas-Drake, 2011a, 2011b; Rivas-Drake et al., 2008; Rivas-Drake, Hughes, & Way, 2009a), as well as their protective effects, in that African American youth who felt others viewed African Americans less favorably were less vulnerable to the negative impact of racial discrimination (Sellers et al., 2006). These findings suggest that youth's understanding of others' evaluations of their group also plays a role in the implications of discrimination.

The underlying mechanisms that account for the promotive and protective effects of racial and ethnic identity are not well established. One possibility is that racial and ethnic identity may bolster self-esteem against some of the demeaning messages that are inherent in racial and ethnic discrimination experiences (Brody et al., 2006; Romero & Roberts, 2003). A second possibility is that racial and ethnic identity may make youth who experience discrimination less likely to make personal attributions for instances of discrimination—attributing discrimination to others, instead—and thereby less likely to suffer from damage to the self-concept (Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers, & Jackson, 2010; Sellers et al., 2006). A third possibility is that the effects of racial and ethnic identity on youth adjustment may be mediated by coping. It may be, for example, that individuals for whom race and ethnicity are more significant spend more time thinking about race, ethnicity, and/or discrimination and develop more varied and sophisticated coping skills (e.g., identifying with school more strongly; Wong et al., 2003) that are more likely to lead to favorable outcomes (Neblett, Shelton, & Sellers, 2004; Umaña-Taylor, Vargas-Chanes, Garcia, & Gonzales-Backen, 2008). Finally, a recent study conducted by Kiang and Fuligni (2010) suggested that youth's sense of meaning in their lives mediated the relation between ethnic identity and adjustment. Together, these proposed associations provide an intriguing nexus of possibilities that implicate self-concept, meaning making, cognitive appraisal, and coping as potential players in the mechanisms that undergird the relations between racial and ethnic identity and youth outcomes.

ETHNIC-RACIAL SOCIALIZATION

Youth's racial and ethnic identity attitudes are often a by-product of *ethnic-racial socialization* (Hughes et al., 2006)—a process through which caregivers convey implicit and explicit messages about the significance and meaning of race and ethnicity, teach children about what it means to be a member of a racial and/or ethnic minority group, and help youth learn to cope with discrimination (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Boykin & Toms, 1985; Coard & Sellers, 2005; Phinney & Chavira, 1995). The notion that caregivers play a primary role in shaping youth's racial and ethnic identity is consistent with developmental theory, which establishes the family as one of the most influential contexts in youth socialization (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Erikson, 1968; García Coll et al., 1996; Zhou, 1997).

Scholars (e.g., Hughes et al., 2006; Knight, Bernal, Garza, & Cota, 1993; Umaña-Taylor, Alfaro, Bámaca, & Guimond, 2009) have identified several different forms of ethnic-racial socialization, including *cultural socialization* (teaching children about their racial-ethnic heritage and history and promoting cultural, racial, and ethnic pride), *preparation for bias* (highlighting the existence of inequalities between groups and preparing youth to cope with discrimination), *egalitarianism* (emphasizing individual character traits such as hard work over racial or ethnic group membership), *self-worth messages* (promoting feelings of individual worth within the broader context of the child's race-ethnicity), *negative messages* (emphasizing negative characteristics associated with being a racial-ethnic minority), *silence about*

race-ethnicity (failing to mention issues pertaining to race or ethnicity), and *promotion of mistrust* (conveying distrust in interracial communications). Primary caregivers of ethnic minority youth differ in the extent to which they engage in ethnic-racial socialization, but several studies suggest that ethnic-racial socialization is fairly common across ethnic minority families (Hughes et al., 2006).

Recent studies across diverse groups of ethnic minority youth link ethnic-racial socialization with a broad range of outcomes, including academic performance (e.g., Bennett, 2006; Brown, Linver, Evans, & DeGennaro, 2009; Smalls, 2009), ethnic and racial identity (e.g., Hughes, Witherspoon, Rivas-Drake, & West-Bey, 2009; Rivas-Drake, Hughes, & Way, 2009b; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2009), and socioemotional adjustment (e.g., Constantine & Blackmon, 2002; Neblett et al., 2008; Rivas-Drake, 2011a). For example, cultural socialization and preparation for bias messages have been associated with academic motivation (Hughes et al., 2006; Neblett, Philip, Cogburn, & Sellers, 2006). Furthermore, parental ethnic-racial socialization has been associated with racial ideology (i.e., beliefs about how members of a racial group should act; Neblett, Smalls, Ford, Nguyên, & Sellers, 2009) and ethnic affirmation (e.g., Hughes et al., 2009; Rivas-Drake et al., 2009b). Finally, in the domain of socioemotional outcomes, several studies identify cultural socialization and egalitarian messages as predictors of positive self-concept (e.g., Bowman & Howard, 1985; Davis & Stevenson, 2006). While it is commonly assumed that ethnic-racial socialization is associated with positive youth developmental outcomes, several investigations have also reported negative associations with specific dimensions of ethnic-racial socialization (e.g., cultural socialization and preparation for bias; Marshall, 1995; Neblett et al., 2006; Neblett et al., 2008). Thus, not all ethnic-racial socialization is positive. Hughes et al. (2009) have noted, for example, that preparation for bias messages, in isolation, may contribute to low self-esteem in youth by instilling in them a sense of lack of control over their environment, leading them to disengage from academic and other pursuits.

Despite inconsistencies across findings, some studies document the protective effects of ethnic-racial socialization against the negative impact of discrimination. For example, Harris-Britt, Valrie, Kurtz-Costes, and Rowley (2007) found that cultural socialization and moderate levels of preparation for bias independently mitigated the negative association between racial discrimination and self-esteem, and Neblett et al. (2008) found that *patterns* of racial socialization emphasizing both cultural socialization *and* preparation for bias buffered the impact that racial discrimination had on African American adolescents' perceived stress and problem behaviors. This body of work suggests that it may be important to consider how various dimensions of ethnic-racial socialization coalesce to convey metamessages regarding the significance and meaning of race and ethnicity to youth.

Given the few studies that have examined the buffering effect of ethnic-racial socialization on developmental outcomes,

mechanisms underlying the protective effects of ethnic-racial socialization (e.g., see Neblett, Terzian, & Harriott, 2010) are not well understood. Recent studies of the promotive effects of ethnic-racial socialization posit ethnic identity and self-esteem as mediating mechanisms (e.g., Hughes et al., 2009; Murry, Berkel, Brody, Miller, & Chen, 2009), but few studies have statistically evaluated these intermediary variables. In those that do, it appears that the effects that cultural socialization and preparation for bias have on youth outcomes may be mediated by ethnic affirmation and self-esteem. Several possible explanations converge on the notion that ethnic-racial socialization may influence coping responses to racial and ethnic discrimination. For example, cultural socialization messages may foster positive self-perception, increase resistance to negative treatment, and/or help youth to engage challenges and navigate diverse settings (Hughes et al., 2009; Murry et al., 2009). Consistent with this notion, Scott (2003) found that global racial socialization was positively related to *approach* coping strategies (i.e., strategies in which individuals actively confront stress). As a whole, the literature suggests that ethnic-racial socialization may convey its effects by enabling youth to think more positively about themselves and equipping them with specific strategies and skills to successfully negotiate the challenges they encounter.

CULTURAL ORIENTATION

A third culturally informed factor that has been identified as a potential strength for ethnic minority youth is cultural orientation. *Cultural orientation* refers broadly to youth's orientations toward mainstream culture and their ethnic culture and has often been indexed by youth's endorsement of particular cultural values. Such orientations are frequently couched within discussions of *acculturation* and *enculturation*, which characterize orientations toward mainstream and ethnic culture, respectively; however, several studies assess cultural orientation without formal use of this terminology. Ethnic minority youth's orientation toward their ethnic culture is often characterized as promotive, given its positive associations with developmental outcomes–including self-esteem (Constantine, Alleyne, Wallace, & Franklin-Jackson, 2006), racial identity (Thomas, Townsend, & Belgrave, 2003), academic engagement (Gonzales et al., 2008), and well-being (Gonzales et al., 2002)—as well as its negative associations with drug use (Belgrave, Brome, & Hampton, 2000; Nasim, Corona, Belgrave, Utsey, & Fallah, 2007) and externalizing behaviors.

Still, research on the benefits of ethnic and mainstream cultural orientations is mixed (e.g., Deng, Kim, Vaughan, & Li, 2010; Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). On the one hand, studies suggest that youth's mainstream orientation may make youth vulnerable to negative psychological correlates of discrimination. Umaña-Taylor and Updegraff (2007), for example, reported that Latino male adolescents with low orientation toward mainstream culture but high orientation toward Latino

culture were less vulnerable to the negative impact of ethnic discrimination on both self-esteem and depressive symptoms. On the other hand, Deng et al. (2010) reported that for Chinese adolescents, high orientation toward Chinese culture amplified the negative impact of discriminatory experiences with respect to delinquent behaviors, whereas high orientation toward Western culture protected Chinese youth against the impact. It is possible that for some youth, ethnic cultural orientation minimizes the impact of discrimination by influencing its salience and/or significance (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007), as well as coping responses to it (Neblett et al., 2010). For others, as Deng et al. suggest, ethnic cultural orientation may increase vulnerability to discrimination due to the cognitive dissonance youth experience as a result of thinking others view their group favorably and then experiencing discrimination. Moreover, it is possible that the content of various cultural orientations may vary qualitatively by specific ethnic-racial group due to unique experiences a group has had in a particular context, such that certain experiences for one group explicitly incorporate issues of discrimination or social exclusion, but for another group, they do not. For example, an orientation to Haitian culture among youth in Miami may take account of the economic and political marginalization of the group in that context, whereas a cultural orientation to Cuban culture may be less likely to do so, given the group's history in the same context. At present, these intriguing and complementary hypotheses await further empirical testing.

Familism

Although most studies have examined cultural orientation with measures designed to assess *behavioral* acculturation and enculturation (e.g., language use, affiliation with ethnic or mainstream culture), a smaller number of studies have focused on assessing adherence to cultural *values* as an indicator of one's cultural orientation. As with research on behavioral indices of cultural orientation, findings from these studies provide some support for protective and promotive mechanisms but also have produced mixed evidence. In the interest of space, we discuss mechanisms for one cultural value: familism. We focus on familism because prior scholarship has noted the salience of family-oriented values for multiple ethnic groups, including youth of Asian, African, and Latin American descent (Schwartz et al., 2010; Yasui & Dishion, 2007).

Familism encompasses youth's sense of family identification, solidarity, cohesion, and duty, as well as support received from the family (Gil, Wagner, & Vega, 2000; Sabogal, Marín, Otero-Sabogal, & Marín, 1987; Steidel & Contreras, 2003). Various aspects of familism (e.g., family orientation, obligations) have been positively associated with psychological and academic adjustment, particularly among Latino youth and, in some studies, among Asian youth (e.g., Fuligni, Yip, & Tseng, 2002; Gonzales et al., 2008; Juang & Cookston, 2009). Buchanan and Smokowski (2009) found that the positive benefits of familism

were evident beyond the association of discrimination on aggression, underscoring familism's capacity as a promotive factor. In addition, Umaña-Taylor, Updegraff, and Gonzales-Backen (2011) found that familistic values attenuated the association of discrimination with risky behaviors at low and moderate levels of discrimination, suggesting its potential as a protective factor.

With respect to the mechanisms by which cultural orientation is implicated in the link between discrimination and adjustment, a number of studies argue that experience with social disenfranchisement reduces adherence to traditional values, including familism, and this reduction, in turn, is linked to greater risk for negative youth outcomes. For instance, Gil et al. (2000) found that acculturative stress (including perceived discrimination) was concurrently associated with lower familism, which, in turn, was linked to greater dispositions toward deviant behavior 1 year later. Further support for this mechanism comes from Smokowski and Bacallao's (2007) finding that perceived discrimination demonstrated a significant indirect effect on self-esteem through familism values. Another possibility is that for youth from groups characterized by high endorsement of familism, connections to the family may become more salient when they are confronted with discrimination. For instance, Berkel et al. (2010) found that greater discrimination led to heightened endorsement of traditional cultural values (e.g., familism), which in turn was associated with improved youth outcomes. More research is needed to determine the extent to which familism values similarly assuage the experience of discrimination across multiple ethnic and racial groups and to clarify the nature of the mechanisms by which it does so.

AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL

To advance understanding of protective mechanisms in the face of discrimination, we propose a conceptual model to guide future work in examining how these factors might interact to shape positive youth development (see Figure 1). We suggest that three key factors operate as protective factors: racial and ethnic identity, ethnic-racial socialization, and cultural orientation. These three factors reciprocally influence one another while simultaneously influencing and being shaped by self-concept, attributions and cognitive appraisals, and coping. Bidirectional interactions between the protective factors and mediators, in turn, influence the impact of racial discrimination on youth adjustment.

We have briefly alluded to a number of possible mechanisms by which ethnic and racial identity, ethnic-racial socialization, and cultural orientation might impact youth developmental outcomes. First, these factors, generally speaking, may bolster youth's *self-concept*. All three constructs are found to contribute to ethnic minority youth's perceptions of their competence and adequacy. Second, there is evidence that each of the protective factors may play a role in the *cognitive appraisal process*—how youth attend to, understand, and make sense of the world.
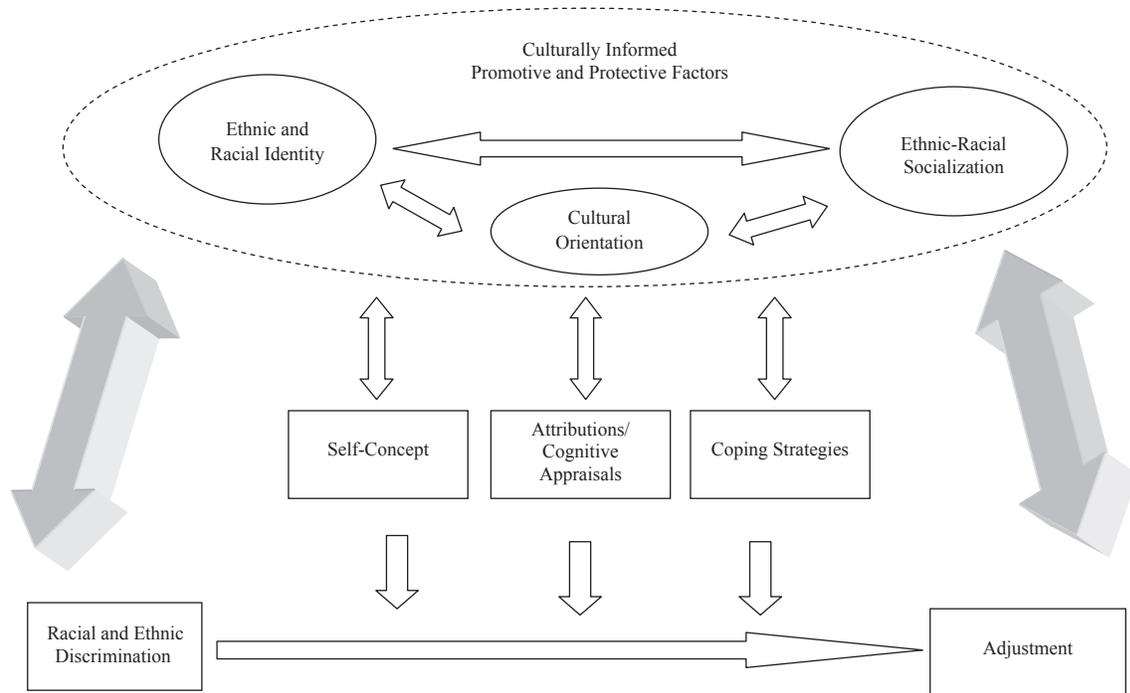
Figure 1. Conceptual model of mechanisms of protection.

Ethnic-racial socialization processes prepare youth to perceive the world in a certain way, while ethnic and racial identity and cultural orientation may inform the salience and significance of discrimination in a given context, influence attributions of personal instances of discrimination, and provide youth with a sense of meaning. Third, *coping* appears to be a critical intermediary process in the promotion of youth outcomes. Although empirical work is limited (see Umaña-Taylor et al., 2008), scholars suggest that ethnic and racial identity and ethnic-racial socialization may facilitate the development of specific adaptive coping skills that help youth to negotiate ethnic and racial discrimination. Similarly, cultural orientation and values such as familism may equip youth with specific resources (e.g., support) that help youth to cope.

In the face of racial adversity, positive messages about the significance and meaning of being a member of a racial or ethnic minority group and positive feelings about one's group allow youth to feel competent across multiple domains (e.g., academic, social, behavioral). These positive self-evaluations, in conjunction with a positive sense of meaning about racial and ethnic group membership, may inform how youth experience and understand the world. Moreover, at any given moment, what is salient is informed by prior socialization and the personal significance and meaning of youth's ethnic and racial identity. Youth who are more aware of discrimination due to their identity, socialization, or cultural orientation may understand a racial or ethnic affront as part of the way the world operates rather than as a personal derogation. Finally, consistent with stress, appraisal, and coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the ways in

which individuals make sense of their surroundings informs how they cope with their environment. Thus, youth who feel confident, capable, and competent may perceive the world in such a way that promotes more adaptive coping strategies (e.g., dealing with a stressor head on; Scott, 2003) than do youth who feel insecure and perceive the world as threatening. It is likely that the protective factors operate in a cyclical, rather than a linear, manner, such that they mutually influence one another across development (e.g., socialization informs identity and vice versa, cultural orientation informs identity and socialization) and that the proposed mediators also influence the protective factors (as suggested by the bidirectional arrows in Figure 1; e.g., see Townsend & Lanphier, 2007, who found that coping influenced racial identity in African American youth). Moreover, although beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that bidirectional effects may play out *between* caregivers and youth. For example, youth ethnic identity may inform caregiver socialization; caregivers' own cultural orientations may inform youth's vulnerability to discrimination, youth's racial discrimination experiences and adjustment may influence their developing racial and ethnic identity and how their parents engage them around ethnicity and race, and so on.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As scholars build upon the strengths of the existing literature and ponder next steps in understanding racial and ethnic protective factors, several challenges remain. First, while studies increasingly examine racial and ethnic discrimination in diverse

groups, there are some ethnic subgroups about which little is known. Experiences of racial and ethnic discrimination are diverse, and researchers should allow for the possibility that racial and ethnic promotive and protective factors may operate in different ways both *within* and *between* racial and ethnic minority youth groups. It may be, for example that differences between contexts where youth reside (e.g., Mexican adolescents in the Southwest as compared to Nicaraguans in South Florida) will have implications for their discrimination experiences and the associated protective processes. Second, there is a need to move beyond the mere identification of promotive and protective factors to explicating the *processes* by which racial and ethnic discrimination are linked to developmental outcomes. Empirical investigation of the potential underlying mechanisms proposed here across diverse developmental periods will be critical to advance the field. Although many studies examine racial and ethnic discrimination processes during adolescence, it is well established that experiences of racial and ethnic discrimination, reflection on the significance and meaning of race and ethnicity, and exposure to family values and cultural socialization begin earlier in life, are transactional, and likely evolve over time. Finally, multidimensional, person-centered approaches (e.g., Neblett et al., 2008; White-Johnson, Ford, & Sellers, 2010) are needed to examine constellations of ethnic and racial identity beliefs, ethnic-racial socialization experiences, and cultural orientations—as well as factors that are not explicitly ethnic or racial—that characterize groups of youth who display similar resilience trajectories. Such studies will increase the understanding of how multiple culturally informed factors, as well as those not explicitly racial or ethnic in nature (e.g., gender, peer support, economic stress), simultaneously interact to inform youth trajectories following exposure to discrimination.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have briefly summarized work examining the promotive and protective effects of racial and ethnic identity, ethnic-racial socialization, and cultural orientation. This rapidly expanding body of work reflects a welcome departure from the era of deficit-oriented, cultural-deprivation approaches to the study of racial and ethnic minority youth development. We hope that scholars will reflect on important themes we have highlighted and continue to conduct systematic investigations of ethnic and racial promotive and protective factors in resilience processes among ethnic minority youth. This important work has the potential to advance the development of culturally informed, empirically supported interventions for racial and ethnic minority youth.

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