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ARTICLE



Attachment perspectives on race, prejudice, and anti-racism

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ABSTRACT

Central to attachment theory is the idea that behavior in close relationships can best be understood *in context*. Although decades of research have illuminated cross-cultural patterns of caregiving and attachment, there remains a critical need to increase research with African American families, examine the specific sociocultural context of systemic anti-Black racism, and integrate the rich theory and research of Black scholars. The goal of this special issue is to bring together attachment researchers and scholars studying Black youth and families to leverage and extend attachment-related work to advance anti-racist perspectives in developmental science. The papers in this special issue, highlighted in the introduction, illuminate pathways of risk and resilience in Black children, adolescents, and families and point to the protective power of relationships (and the limits of such protection) for mental and physical health. We highlight critical questions to guide ongoing dialogue and collaboration on this important topic.

KEYWORDS

Attachment; racism; anti-racism; African American families; Black youth development

In the summer of 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States, during an arrest under suspicion of a minor infraction, White police officer Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd, a Black man, by kneeling on his neck for 9 minutes, until Floyd could no longer breathe. Embedded in the story of George Floyd are two stories of parenthood: In his life, Floyd was a father to five children, and in the moments before his death, he called out for his mother. His murder galvanized the Black Lives Matter movement, while also illustrating the ways in which systemic racism cascades through daily and intergenerational experiences of discrimination and stress (Murry et al., 2018), often resulting in family trauma and disrupted or lost attachment relationships that might ordinarily provide support and protection. Data show the mechanisms by which systemic racism gives rise to ongoing cycles of relationship rupture – including family separations via disproportionate rates of school suspension, child welfare removals, and incarceration (Barbarin, 2021; Elliott & Reid, 2019; U.S. Dept. of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2016). Systematic racism is also evident in health disparities, higher mortality among African American mothers and infants, police brutality, and disproportionate rates of poverty (Beck et al., 2020; Feagin, 2013; Kimmel et al., 2016). Thus, this is a critical moment and opportunity for developmental scientists studying family

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relationships to consider how attachment theory and research – with a central focus on separation, loss, and trauma experiences – might offer insights useful in understanding racism and anti-racism.

Attachment theory posits that children's need for love and connection is universal; critically, however, both Bowlby (1969/1982) and Ainsworth (1967, 1995) emphasized the key role of *context* in shaping how attachment and caregiving become organized and are displayed. Yet at the time of their writing, specific socio-contextual factors – such as the legacy of colonialism and ongoing structural inequities – were not widely understood in the field of developmental psychology. Although there are now decades of excellent cross-cultural research on caregiving and attachment (Mesman et al., 2016, 2018; Posada et al., 2016, 2016; see Mesman, 2021 special issue in this journal), research on attachment in African American families has remained limited (Malda & Mesman, 2017), and the field of attachment has given somewhat limited consideration to contextual factors beyond socioeconomic status that shape the daily experiences of families of color, such as systemic racism and cultural strengths.

In contrast, research on Black youth development often takes as its starting point the critical role of socio-cultural context in human development – recognizing that systemic racism, experiences of discrimination, and social inequality are pervasive in the environments in which African American families must raise their children, and that these realities present unique threats that caregivers must navigate to keep their children safe (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018). In Murry et al.'s (2018) integrative model of stress in African American families, she and her colleagues suggest that the historical vestiges of slavery and restrictive Jim Crow post-emancipation laws (aiming to reinforce White Supremacist power) undergird current socio-contextual stressors such as systemic racism, which inform families' social position (e.g. social class) and give rise to a range of more proximal daily stressors (e.g. limited employment opportunities, discrimination at school). These daily stressors, alongside the "ordinary magic" (Masten, 2015) of cultural strengths (e.g. positive racial socialization, support from extended kin) impact family relationships and psychological functioning and in turn, children's development.

Notably, each of these fields – attachment and Black youth development – share a common investment in understanding and promoting healthy social-emotional outcomes, and each offers rich theory and research on the central role of family relationships in supporting such outcomes. But as Causadias and his colleagues (this issue) point out in their commentary, there has been little cross-pollination between these fields: the authors' data show that "researchers and people of African and/or Latin American and Caribbean origin are often under-represented in mainstream attachment theory" and also that "attachment theory is not prominent in scholarship centered on the lives and experience of people of African and/or Latin American and Caribbean origin" (Causadias et al., this issue, p. XX). One reviewer from the field of African American youth development noted, "I've had so many Black students wanting to get into the area of attachment but not feeling a connection to it, or not feeling as if the ideas they have are relevant or would be welcome. This [special issue] I believe will be a great help."

Thus, the goal of this special issue of *Attachment & Human Development* is to bring together attachment researchers and scholars of color studying Black youth and families to stimulate conversation about how we might leverage and extend attachment-related work to advance an anti-racist perspective in developmental science.

We asked authors: What can the field of attachment do, and what can we do better? Our central aims were (1) to build bridges between scholars of Black youth development and attachment as a starting point for future conversation and collaboration on this topic; (2) to center the experiences of Black children, adolescents, and adults in this body of research; and (3) to amplify the work of scholars of color. Here we briefly introduce the articles and highlight key questions for ongoing collaborative research at the intersection of attachment and Black youth development.

In 7 papers, 3 commentaries, and an epilogue, the authors in this special issue address novel questions about how attachment theory and research can be applied and enriched to better understand and support African American children and their families. To provide a theoretical grounding for this work, Mikulincer and Shaver (this issue) present an overview of attachment theory and review research on the role of security in promoting psychological openness and empathy, supporting emotional stability and resilience in the face of stress, and facilitating positive intergroup relations by reducing prejudice and aggression. Their review highlights the relevance of attachment to understanding and shifting intergroup prejudice but also illuminates key areas where further work is needed. For example, *to what extent can attachment security (perhaps in combination with critical racial socialization) reduce anti-Black prejudice, mitigate the internalization of racist messages, and facilitate anti-racist behavior? and in what contexts is security insufficient?*

Following this review is a series of papers that focuses specifically on African American populations to explore attachment-related factors that promote healthy development in early childhood (Dunbar et al., this issue), middle childhood and the transition to adolescence (Murry et al., this issue), across the teenage years (Stern et al., this issue), and into adulthood (Ehrlich et al., this issue). Tyrell and Masten (this issue) underscore that these promotive factors include the availability, responsiveness, and supportive caregiving of Black fathers and outline several exciting avenues for future research on Black fatherhood and attachment. For example, *what are the common and unique pathways by which Black fathers foster secure attachment in their children, and what structural barriers must be addressed to support these pathways?*

With regard to precursors of attachment security, Dunbar and colleagues (this issue) offer a counterpoint to traditional definitions of maternal sensitivity. The authors suggest that to provide a secure base and safe haven for their young Black children in the context of systemic racism, caregivers must engage in racial socialization that prepares children to face bias in their social world. In her commentary, Coard ([this issue](#)) underscores the importance of parental racial socialization as a “growing point” for future research on attachment-related processes in African American families. Racial socialization may function as a form of parental protection, as part of responding to children’s distress following racialized experiences, and as support for autonomy to prepare children to safely navigate novel environments (e.g. a new school). A question that arises from this work is: *Does positive racial socialization from one’s attachment figure (in combination with other forms of secure base provision) become integrated into Black children’s secure internal working model (IWM) of the self? And to what extent does a secure IWM of the self as worthy of love and care – of one’s life and other Black lives mattering – counteract negative White supremacist cultural messages?*

Importantly, Dunbar et al.’s findings (this issue) show that the combination of mothers’ preparation for bias with high emotional support and moderate suppression of children’s negative emotion best predicted emotion regulation among young Black children. They

propose that because Black children's expression of negative emotions is often met with harsher responses from authority figures (e.g. teachers, law enforcement; Goff et al., 2014), children may adapt by learning to suppress emotion in certain contexts. In support of this view, Stern et al. (this issue) found that adolescents' experiences of neighborhood racism were associated with heightened attachment avoidance – a hallmark of which is suppressing or deactivating strategies for regulating emotion in close relationships. Further, attachment avoidance (measured with respect to close relationships generally) predicted increases in depressive symptoms from mid- to late adolescence only among White teens, but appeared to be less detrimental for Black teens' mental health. Together, this work raises several questions for research on attachment and emotion:

- *In what contexts might avoidant strategies for regulating emotion be adaptive for Black youth? Is avoidance adaptive primarily in the context of predominantly White spaces, or with regard to specific emotions (e.g. anger) that may elicit discriminatory responses?*
- *Is a secure attachment style in Black youth characterized less by stable, trait-like regulatory "styles" and more by flexibility in emotion regulation strategies across different contexts and relationships (i.e. "emotional code-switching"; Lozada et al., 2021)?*
- *Are there long-term costs to avoidant strategies (see Ehrlich et al., this issue), and how might these costs be mitigated by relationships with caregivers, peers, and communities of color that provide safe spaces for youth to express their full range of emotion?*

Further elaborating on the developmental pathways supporting Black youth mental health, Murry et al. (this issue) demonstrate the ways in which experiences of racial discrimination cascade through families, with "spillover effects" for youth adjustment. In a large longitudinal sample of African American families, they show that mothers' experiences of discrimination are consequential for maternal mental health and the quality of the parent-child relationship, and that these parental factors in turn shape caregiving behavior. In line with attachment theory, mothers' positive caregiving behavior in middle childhood had downstream effects on youths' capacity to regulate emotion in early adolescence, which forecasted greater social competence and lower depressive symptoms in mid-adolescence.

The risks associated with contextual stressors, as well as the benefits conferred by high-quality relationships, extend well beyond adolescence, impacting biological outcomes in adulthood, as illustrated by Ehrlich and colleagues (this issue). In a study of African American youth followed into adulthood, the authors found that neighborhood poverty during adolescence predicted higher allostatic load at age 19, which forecasted changes in cellular aging from age 20–27; crucially, this link was moderated by adult attachment style, such that allostatic load predicted faster cellular aging for those high in avoidance but not for those low in avoidance (measured with respect to a specific romantic partner). Together, this work demonstrates that high-quality relationships with attachment figures may contribute to resilience in African American youth both via promotive (main) effects of supportive caregiving (Murry et al., this issue) and via protective (moderating) effects of attachment security that buffer against contextual stressors (Ehrlich et al., this issue). A question that arises from this work is, by *what*

mechanisms do secure, supportive relationships contribute to positive mental and physical health outcomes for Black youth (e.g. secure IWMs of the self and one's racial group, physiological co-regulation of stress)?

Importantly, these papers underscore the value of measuring specific contextual factors (e.g. neighborhood poverty, maternal and youth experiences of discrimination) and connecting them to attachment-related developmental processes. In addition to these factors, Graham's commentary ([this issue](#)) highlights children's school context (e.g. quality of teacher–student relationships, classroom racial/ethnic diversity) as a critical area for future work. Integrating these contextual factors not only enriches our theoretical models, but also illuminates pathways for prevention and intervention at multiple levels of analysis: at the systemic level (e.g. enacting anti-racist policy to reduce family poverty, addressing racial inequities in mental health care), at the school and family level (e.g. by supporting teachers and caregivers to provide a secure base for Black children), and at the individual level (e.g. by providing culturally relevant, relationship-focused therapy; see Coard et al., 2004; Kelly et al., 2020).

Drawing out these implications for intervention, Gaztambide ([this issue](#)) integrates critical race theory and research on social rank and dehumanization to inform attachment-based therapy. He argues that psychotherapeutic action must go beyond healing interpersonal ruptures toward helping clients “mentalize anti-Blackness” in order to begin the work of healing societal ruptures. He offers compelling case examples with both Black and non-Black clients that demonstrate the power of bringing awareness to issues of racism and social rank in the therapy room. These case studies provide a useful teaching tool and starting point for a larger conversation regarding *how can attachment-based clinical training and practice integrate a deeper understanding of racism and anti-racism? Can psychotherapists provide a secure base from which Black clients can experience confidence that their lives matter – that they are worthy of love – while also holding the reality of a racist society that too often negates this worth?*

We end this volume with an Epilogue in which we share some of the generative conversations and debates that arose in the special issue, and to map clearly what we see as guiding considerations for working toward anti-racist perspectives in attachment theory, research, and practice going forward. We suggest that to the extent that attachment theory can be applied in ways that challenge and seek to dismantle oppressive systems of White supremacy and colonialism – for example, by leveraging theory and research to advocate for policies that reduce structural inequities and barriers to support for Black children and caregivers – the field has the potential make meaningful contributions to anti-racist efforts (Stern, Barbarin, & Cassidy, [this issue](#)).

In closing, we note that *love* was central to the nonviolent ideology and training of the Civil Rights Movement (Lewis, 2012), just as it is central to the science of attachment. At this historical moment, we have an opportunity to critically reflect on the field of attachment and human development and to imagine the ways in which “the growth of love” (Ainsworth, 1967) might contribute to longstanding efforts to realize Dr. King's vision of the “beloved community.”

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