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Does the Messenger Matter? Ethnic-Racial Socialization Practices and Self Esteem in Biracial Adults

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Abstract

Previous studies have found that ethnic-racial socialization can protect against mental health problems in biracial individuals. However, it is unclear if the effects depend on the race of the parent it is coming from. The current study sought to examine the relations between socialization and self-esteem within biracial adults. Specifically, we tested whether effects differed if the socialization messages came primarily from the White parent versus parent of color. Participants were recruited online via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and included a group of 165 biracial or multiracial adults between the ages of 24 – 63 (58.2% female, 41.8% male). All participants had one White parent and one parent of color. Participants completed a demographics survey, the Multiracial Youth Socialization Scale, the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale, and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Regression analyses revealed significant effect of socialization to self-esteem in three of the eight socialization approaches. However, race of the parent significantly moderated the effects of Preparation for Bias and Colorblind socialization practices on self-esteem. The effects of these socialization practices were stronger when they were primarily coming from the parent of color. These findings support the idea that there are many racial/ethnic socialization practices that can be protective for biracial youth (e.g., navigating multiple heritages, biracial identity) and that the burden can be shared by both caregivers regardless of identity. Strategies used by caregivers of color may be more impactful and therefore caregivers may wish to avoid the more controversial socialization practices like colorblind messaging.

Introduction

The 2020 US census recorded 33.8 million people identified as multiracial. Among the population, the largest combination is White with some other race, which has increased over 1,000% between 2010 and 2020 (Jones et al., 2024). The multiracial population may experience higher levels of identity crises and mental health concerns because of their complex racial-ethnic identities (Helm, 2024). Many biracial individuals experience discrimination against the racial group membership inferred from their non-white phenotype or monoracism against their multiple racial background (Christophe, et al., 2021). Based on the 2015 Pew Survey of Multiracial Americans of 1,555 participants, 55% of participants have been subject to slurs or jokes and 43% have received poor service because of their racial background (Parker et al., 2015). They may also struggle with self-identification, experience social pressure to conform to one ethnic-racial identity (ERI) or feel isolated from their ethnic-racial groups (Helm, 2024). In fact, Parker et al. (2015) found that many participants have felt like an outsider for various reasons—half of the participants reported being treated badly by a relative or family member, and 35% of them have been teased or made fun of as a child.

Multiracial individuals are at increased risk for worse mental health problems compared to their monoracial counterparts (Oh et al., 2024). Studies have started to identify specific risk and protective factors for this understudied group. For example, multiracial specific discrimination such as familial discrimination (i.e. discrimination perpetrated by family members) and identity invalidation (i.e. others imposing inaccurate racial categorization) are more damaging to mental health in multiracial individuals

beyond general discrimination experiences (Franco et al. 2021). In contrast, the conceptual models of multiracial identity development emphasize that experience and labeling of differentness as biracial can be positively valued, provided that parents provide youths with the safety to make sense of their experience and develop their self-concept (Kich, 1992, as cited in Atkin & Jackson, 2021). ERI is defined as the sense of belonging that a person feels toward a racial-ethnic group and the meaning that the person assigns to the group membership (Wakefield & Hudley, 2007). These connections and sense of belonging generally promote resilience when facing discrimination and can support mental well-being (Moore et al., 2024; Oh et al., 2024).

Racial-ethnic socialization (RES) is the transmission and acquisition of understanding of attitudes, beliefs, and messages surrounding race and ethnicity from adults to children (Hughes et al., 2006). RES enables children to learn about race and ethnicity through messages from their parents and helps children develop their ERI (Wakefield & Hudley, 2007). Through a systematic review of 44 studies between 1975 and 2005, Hughes et al. (2006) categorized RES into four common approaches: Cultural Socialization (i.e. teaching children about their cultural customs and tradition), Preparation for Bias (i.e. promoting awareness of discrimination and prepare children to cope with it), Promotion of Mistrust (i.e. emphasizing the need of wariness and distrust in interracial interactions), and Egalitarianism (i.e. focusing on individual qualities over racial group membership). Hughes et al. (2006) found Cultural Socialization, promoting confidence and competence, to be associated with higher family and peer self-esteem. On the other hand, Promotion of Mistrust, leading to expectations of discrimination and mistrust, can cause more depressive symptoms and deviant behaviors, while Egalitarianism seems to promote an unrealistic expectation of equal treatment that led to lower school self-esteem. Lastly, results for Preparation for bias was conflicting: while it can equip youth with effective strategies for coping with discriminatory experiences, studies have also found youths to feel more stigmatized from such socialization.

However, the RES approaches that parents use is shaped by their ERI and its centrality (i.e. the salience of ones' ERI), ideology (i.e. the beliefs around ones' ERI), and regard (i.e. the social and personal judgment of ones' ERI) (Sellers et al., 1997, as cited in Hughes et al., 2006). A person who considers ERI to be salient to their identity (high centrality) may have more concrete RES to deliver. A person who has experienced discrimination (low regard) tends to use Preparation for Bias Socialization, while a person who has strong and favorable views may use Cultural Socialization more often. Moreover, a few studies have found significant relationships between parents' identities and their socialization practices (Hughes et al., 2006). In a family with biracial youths, each family member may locate differently in their ERI and hold distinct beliefs around it. For example, a white parent would have a different ERI than the parent of color. Their difference in ERI influence the RES approaches that would use to communicate with their biracial youths, who has a completely different experience in their ERI.

Atkin et al. (2021) suggested that multiracial individuals may not always identify with their monoracial parents, and the monoracial paradigm can be challenging for multiracial population to navigate. Growing up in in a household with these different cultures, practices, beliefs, ethnic-racial experiences, and

consistent interracial interactions, multiracial youths' experiences of RES can be unique compared to monoracial populations. Moreover, because of the different ERI of the parents, they may give different messages. As a result, it is difficult to generalize the outcome of RES for monoracial to multiracial populations. In addition, parents who are monoracial may not understand the specific challenges that multiracial youths, and White parents may not understand the experience of a racial minority (Atkin & Jackson, 2021). r Similarities between characteristics can make it easier for parents to understand youths' experiences. While many participants described their parent of color as more likely to understand and support them in problem solving and identity development others also emphasized the significance of parents who make an effort to overcome differences to support them (Atkin & Jackson, 2021). Parent support in biracial youths' ERI development is crucial from both parents. However, parents with different ERI may support their children in different ways, and such differences can be very supportive to the youths' experience or be considered as evidence of disconnection (Atkin & Jackson, 2021).

Current Study

Despite the complexity of ERI in biracial populations and the unique challenges they face, the mental wellbeing of this population is understudied. Studies have shown that appropriate RES messages can support mental wellbeing and self-esteem for monoracial samples; however, it can be difficult to generalize to biracial individuals due to the vastly different ethnic-racial experience. Moreover, although studies has recognized how parents of different ERI are likely to use different RES approaches, no research to date has examined whether the messengers of each RES message matter in their impact on biracial youths. Hence, the current study hopes to focus on families with one White parent and one parent of color and look at how each parent delivers RES messages. We aimed to understand which RES messages are used within biracial families and how they affect self-esteem. More importantly, we aimed to understand whether it matters which parent the message is coming from. Through our study, we want to advance our knowledge of the understudied population by better understanding the RES messages that support positive mental health outcome for biracial youths and hope to provide some guidance to biracial families navigating through the complex ethnic-racial experience.

Based on past literatures, we expect that the messages that promote ethnical-racial pride would be related to higher self-esteem and that the messages that de-emphasize uniqueness or promote mistrust would be related to lower self-esteem. Hence, we hypothesize that Navigating Multiple Heritages Socialization and Multiracial Identity Socialization would promote self-esteem as these messages focus on the strength of one's heritages. We expect that Colorblind Socialization, Negative Socialization and Silent Socialization would be correlated with lower self-esteem as these messages can reinforce stereotypes and invalidate negative experiences that biracial population may experience. Finally, we hypothesize that the strength of the messages from the parent of color will be stronger than the messages from the White parent.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 160 biracial adults ranged from 24–63 years old (*M* = 30.2, *SD* = 9.1). 58.1% of the participants identified as female, and 41.9% as male. Among all participants, 84.4% has completed bachelor's degree, and 15.6% has completed master's degree. Participants reported income from the past year, which ranged from $4,000 – $1,000,000 (*M* = 97,622.6, *SD* = 174,675.6). All participants had one White parent and one parent of color. 61.9% of the participants had Black-White background, 15.6% had Hispanic-White background, 9.4% had Native American-White background, 8.2% has more than 2 racial backgrounds, 4.4% had Asian-White background, and 0.6% had MENA-White background. Among the participants, 50.6% identified as White, 28.7% identified as Black, 17.5% identified as Biracial, 2.5% identified as Hispanic, and 0.6% as Asian or Asian American. Interestingly, 68.1% of the participants do not identify with their minority background; among those who identifies with their minority background, 89.9% identifies as Black or African American.

Procedure

The study was approved by the [BLINDED FOR REVIEW]'s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants were recruited online via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to participate in the Qualtrics survey. Potential participants completed a screener survey that asked about their ethnic-racial heritage to ensure that participants were biracial with both White and ethnic-minoritized heritage. Participants were only allowed to continue with the main study if they selected the options White and at least one minoritized ethnic-racial background. To minimize the incentive to deceive, participants were not aware of the inclusion criteria of biracial heritage. Eligible participants completed the Qualtrics survey which took approximately 45 minutes. Participants were then compensated $1.50 to ensure ethical compensation without increasing potential falsifying responses. To ensure that participants were human subjects and not web robots, a Completely Automated Public Turing Test to tell Computers and Human Apart (CAPTCHA) verification was included directly after the consent form. To increase reliability, instructed response items (IRIs) were randomly distributed throughout the survey to assess participants' attention and detect careless responding.

Measures

The participants completed demographic questions including age, gender, education level, income, ethnic-racial heritage, and ERI. The participants also completed Multiracial Youth Socialization Scale (MY-Soc) and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES).

Multiracial Youth Socialization Scale (MY-Soc)

The MY-soc is a 62-item self-report assessment of the racial-ethnic messages that are communicated in multiracial families (Atkin et al., 2021). The scale measuring eight types of socializations: Navigating

Multiple Heritages Socialization, Multiracial Identity Socialization, Preparation for Mono-racism Socialization, Negative Socialization, Colorblind Socialization, Diversity Appreciation Socialization, Race-Conscious Socialization, and Silent Socialization (Atkin et al., 2022). Items are rated on a 6-point Likert-type response scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating greater exposure to that type of socialization. This measure asks participants to complete ratings for each parent/ caregiver. The scale was supported by validity and reliability tests (Atkin et al., 2022).

The eight socializations are different methods that caregivers of biracial youths use to help the youths navigating their ethnic-racial identities. Navigating Multiple Heritages is the degree that caregivers socialized their children to be familiar with all their racial-ethnic backgrounds. Multiracial Identity is the degree that caregivers encouraged their children to explore the meaning of the multiracial identity and pride in their multiracial identity. Preparation for Mono-racism is the degree that caregivers prepared their children for potential racial discrimination exposure to mono-racism. Negative socialization is the degree that caregivers ERI reinforced negative racial stereotypes and/or prejudicial beliefs. Race-Conscious socialization is the degree that caregivers taught their children about history of race/ racism, systematic racism, and racial inequality. Colorblind is the degree that caregivers denied and/or minimized the significance/ importance of race and racism. Diversity Appreciation is the degree that caregivers taught their children to appreciate and respect differences in racial backgrounds and cultures of other people. Lastly, Silence socialization is the degree that caregivers ignored topics of race/racism or refused to talk to about race and racism.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

The RSES is a 10 item self-report scale of self-esteem for various groups (Rosenberg, 1979). The items are rated on a 4-point Likert-type response scale from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*). The scale involves 5 negatively worded items and can be scored by totaling the items after reverse-scoring the negatively worded items. According to Rosenberg (1979), the scale has high internal consistency of .92 and correlates significantly with other measures of self-esteem.

Data Analysis

Power analysis using G*Power was conducted to determine the sample size needed (Faul et al., 2009). With a small effect size of 0.1, a sample size of 158 was determined for the moderation analysis. IBM SPSS Version 29 was used to analyze the data. Biracial correlations examined gender identity, ERI, income, and education as potential covariates.

A moderation analyses using SPSS Process macro was conducted for each RES to examine whether the effect of RES practice on self-esteem depending on the ERI of the caregiver who delivers the RES (Hayes, 2022). Covariates determined in the preliminary analyses were included in the 8 models. If there was not

significant moderation, multiple regression models were run to examine the main effects of RES on self-esteem, controlling for identified covariates.

Results

Covariates

Based on preliminary analyses, ERI, income, and gender were examined as considered potential covariates. Education was not considered as a covariate due to the lack of variation (84.4% participants had a bachelor's degree and the rest of participants had a master's degree). One-way between subjects ANOVA showed insignificant result – self-esteem does not differs based on ERI of participants, F (4, 155) = 1.85, p = .122. A bivariate correlation also showed insignificant difference in self-esteem based on gender, r (158) = .03, p = .692; however, the test showed significant correlation between income and self-esteem, r (158) = .17, p = .032, as concluded in previous studies (Twenge & Campbell, 2002). Hence, income was controlled in the primary analysis as the only covariate.

Primary Analyses

Four of the eight socializations had main effects on self-esteem, some positive and some negative (See Table 1). Navigating Multiple Heritage Socialization was significantly associated with higher self-esteem, b = .12, SE = .06, p = .042 (β = .23, small effect size; Ferguson, 2009). Similarly, Multiracial Identity Socialization was statistically associated with higher self-esteem, b = .29, SE = .07, p < .001 (β = .45, moderate effect size).

Table 1

Summary of Main Effects of Different Socialization Practices on Self-Esteem

Socialization	*β*	*b*	*SE*	*95% CI*		*p-value*
				LL	*UL*	
Navigating Multiple Heritages	.233	.122	.060	.005	.240	.042*
Multiracial Identity	.446	.284	.067	.152	.416	< .001**
Negative	− .460	− .228	.050	− .327	− .129	< .001**
Silence	− .264	− .085	.041	− .166	− .005	.038*
Race-Conscious	− .008	− .005	.079	− .161	.152	.954
Diversity Appreciation	.046	.028	.074	− .118	.175	.702

Note. Each socialization was analyzed in a model independent to other socializations.

CI = confidence interval for *β*; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

**p*<.05. ***p*<.01

On the other hand, Negative Socialization was significantly associated with lower self-esteem, $b = -.23$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$ ($\beta = .46$, moderate effect size). Silence Socialization was also significantly associated with lower self-esteem, $b = -.09$, $SE = .04$, $p = .038$ ($\beta = -.26$, small effect size). These main effects indicate that these socialization practices had these effects on self-esteem regardless of which parent the messages came from. However, Race-Conscious Socialization was not significantly correlated with self-esteem, $b = -.01$, $SE = .08$, $p = .954$, nor was Diversity Appreciation not significantly correlated with self-esteem, $b = .03$, $SE = .08$, $p = .702$.

Out of the eight socialization approaches, moderation effect of caregiver was found for Preparation for Mono-racism and Colorblind Socializations. The significant interaction term between caregiver and socialization, $b = -.16$, $SE = .09$, $p = .068$, suggest the effect of Preparation for Mono-racism Socialization on self-esteem varies as a function of the racial identity of the caregiver (Fig. 1). For participants who received the socialization from their parents of color, the association was negative and significant, indicating that greater Preparation for Mono-racism Socialization predicted lower levels of self-esteem, $b = -.14$, $SE = .05$, $p = .013$. For participants who received the socialization mostly from their white parent, the association between Preparation for Mono-racism Socialization and self-esteem was not significant, $b = .02$, $SE = .07$, $p = .723$.

For Colorblind Socialization, the interaction between the socialization and caregiver was significant, $b = -.18$, $SE = .09$, $p = .041$, suggesting that the effect of Colorblind Socialization on self-esteem varies as a function of the racial identity of the caregiver. For participants who received the socialization from their parents of color, the association was negative and significant, indicating that greater Colorblind Socialization predicted lower levels of self-esteem, $b = -.19$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$. For participants who received the socialization mostly from their white parent, the association between Colorblind Socialization and self-esteem was not significant, $b = -.01$, $SE = .07$.

Discussion

The current study examined the relationship between RES and self-esteem of biracial population. We found that RES approaches that focus on the strengths of their unique identities rather than discussing race and ethnicity broadly was most protective for self-esteem. Consistent to the hypothesis, Navigating Multiple Heritage Socialization and Multiracial Identity Socialization, both of which involve active engagement to racial heritages and biracial identity, related to higher self-esteem, regardless of which parent the messages were coming from. Cultural traditions and heritage are practiced and maintained collectively within a community. Actively participating in and practicing cultural traditions can strengthen one's feelings of belonging to a community and identity (Ismail, 2021). Kellogg and Liddell (2012) found that it's particularly important for biracial populations to possess knowledge about the racial groups of their heritage to help them grow a sense of pride in their ERI. Navigating Multiple Heritage Socialization provides the space for biracial population to experience these connections and explore their identities, which enables them to navigate across their heritages through a proud and positive lens. Given that being biracial can be more complicated due to racial categorization and monoracial expectations,

delivering Multiracial Identity Socialization can focus on the uniqueness of and inspire pride in biracial identity (Harris et al., 2020).

Contrary to hypotheses, neither Diversity Appreciation Socialization nor Race-Conscious Socialization significantly related to self-esteem. Diversity Appreciation Socialization focus on learning about the differences among all ethnic-racial groups outside of one's heritage. It can be presented as "eating different cultural food and visiting places of other cultures" or "to hang out with a lot of different groups" (Atkin et al., 2021). Meanwhile, Race-Conscious Socialization focuses on teaching about the racial inequality and prejudice that all minorities have experienced in the society. Both messages have been found to be crucial for promoting interracial solidarity and reduce racism and biases toward different racial-ethnic identities. However, these approaches do not focus on the uniqueness of individual identities or the positive racial experience and pride in one's personal heritage. Although these RES practices can be important for cultural understanding, they may not directly promote one's self-esteem.

Not surprisingly, the RES approaches that are passive or negative appear to be harmful for self-esteem in a biracial population. By emphasizing negative stereotypes of one's racial background, Negative Socialization can cause one to experience less racial-ethnic pride and self-worth (Neblett et al., 2008). Such familial microaggression and discrimination can be a unique challenge for biracial population, and it is associated with poorer mental wellbeing (Franco et al., 2021). Similarly, Neblett et al., (2008) have found youth experiencing Negative Socialization reported the most negative functioning outcomes. On the other hand, although Silence Socialization does not reinforce the negative stereotypes, it ignores the complexity of being biracial. Unavoidably, biracial population are likely to experience biracial microaggression because of the monoracial-only paradigm and expectations. With Silence Socialization, biracial youth had to "walk around in [their] own skin", "navigate around questions that turned into insults", and live with confusion and anger (Samuels, 2009).

In contrast to the hypotheses, many of the RES approaches appeared to promote positive mental health when coming from either parent; however, there were two that seemed to depend on the messenger. Specifically, Preparation for Mono-racism Socialization and Colorblind Socialization only had adverse effects on self-esteem when the message was coming from the parent of color. Preparation for Mono-racism Socialization aims to prepare biracial people for prejudice and differential treatment due to their biracial identity (Csizmadia & Atkin, 2022). Although parents, who anticipate that their child may face discrimination and injustice may consider Preparation for Mono-racism Socialization as a method to teach their children how to respond, the socialization approach can cause internalizing behaviors and negative mental wellbeing (Osborne et al., 2021). For many parents of color, these messages may relate to knowledge of historical events and personal experiences of discrimination and racial trauma; hence, effects can be more powerful (Csizmadia & Atkin, 2022).

Oppositely, Colorblind Socialization denies racism and delivers the message that "color should not and does not matter", which may be problematic for a different reason (Neville et al., 2000, as cited in Atkin & Ahn, 2022). A colorblind ideology may require a parent of color to deny racism and the challenges that

minorities face daily. People of color may endorse such ideology when they have internalized the distorted messages about racism (Speight et al., 2016). However, biracial population can not only experience the discriminations and racial challenges as a minority, but they also experience mono-racism and other forms of isolations and invalidations. By denying challenges and experiences that negatively impact the population, Colorblind Socialization, particularly from a parent of color who theoretically experiences these as well, may negatively affect the offspring's self-esteem.

The study showed strong support for the significant positive impact of Navigating Multiple Heritage Socialization and Multiracial Identity Socialization to self-esteem in biracial populations. More importantly, both RES approaches appear protective regardless of the parent the message comes from. Because both socialization methods emphasize the importance of having multiple heritages and the connection to both cultures and traditions, it can be inferred that these RES approaches not only are helpful regardless of the racial identity of the parent delivering, but more protective when both parents are actively providing resources and knowledge about their racial heritage and engaging in positive conversations. The co-parenting practice to connect to both heritages in a biracial family has been found beneficial for biracial children (Seider et al., 2023).

The current study also strongly suggests that the responsibility of RES should be shared by both caregivers regardless of identity. Though some strategies used by caregivers of color may be more impactful, these strategies are generally not recommended. Hence, all caregivers may wish to avoid the more controversial socialization practices. Preparation for Mono-racism can overemphasize the racial barrier for biracial population, leading them to feel helpless and lacking control over potential experience of discrimination and lowering self-esteem (Harris-Britt et al, 2017).

On the other hand, Colorblind Socialization deemphasize racial experience and negative impact of it, which can cause biracial population to feel more vulnerable and isolated in the experiences. Because biracial individuals can be an insider and outsider of a racial group, Negative Socialization of their ethnic-racial heritage can be hurtful and confusing, causing intrafamilial racism and mistrust; lastly, Silence Socialization not only contribute to racialized structure and norm, but it also leaves biracial youths to feel unprepared in facing racial discrimination (Csizmadia & Atkin, 2022).

Constraints on Generality

The current study is the first to consider the nuances of RES approaches within a family unit of biracial individuals. However, some limitations need to be acknowledged. The procedure of the study required biracial adults to retrospectively reflect their RES experience during their childhood. Children from ages 3 to 5 start to recognize racial differences and caregivers might engage in such conversations. It is unclear from the study to know the moments and age range that participants referred to when completing the survey and if recollections were entirely accurate. Moreover, the analysis of the current study only focused on the ERI of parents (White or BIPOC) and did not consider other factors such who was the primary caregiver or the gender of caregiver. It is possible that the effects of RES approaches may be

more complex and depend on these factors as well. Finally, this cross-sectional study cannot make any claims about causation. Future studies should examine these interactive effects prospectively.

In conclusion, the growing biracial families face unique challenges because of their ethnic-racial identities, but the population is rarely studied. The current study provided insights into the complexity of RES in biracial families and how each member of the family plays critical roles in the ethnic-racial development of children. There are many possibilities for how ethnic-racial identities can be shaped in biracial individuals, and both caregivers can play an important role in their child's development. The current study found the importance of positive RES messages that focus on traditions and inspire pride in one's heritages for biracial youths. Although ethnic-racial socializations in biracial families can be complicated, these preliminary findings may provide some guidance that can benefit biracial youths' self-esteem and inform future research with this understudied population.

Declarations

Author Contribution

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection were performed by Cassidy Erbst and Nicole Mahrer. All authors contributed to the data analysis. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Kaitlin Sun and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the authors upon reasonable request by corresponding author.

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Figures

Moderation Effect of ERI of Caregiver in the Relationship Between Preparation for Mono-Racism and Self-Esteem

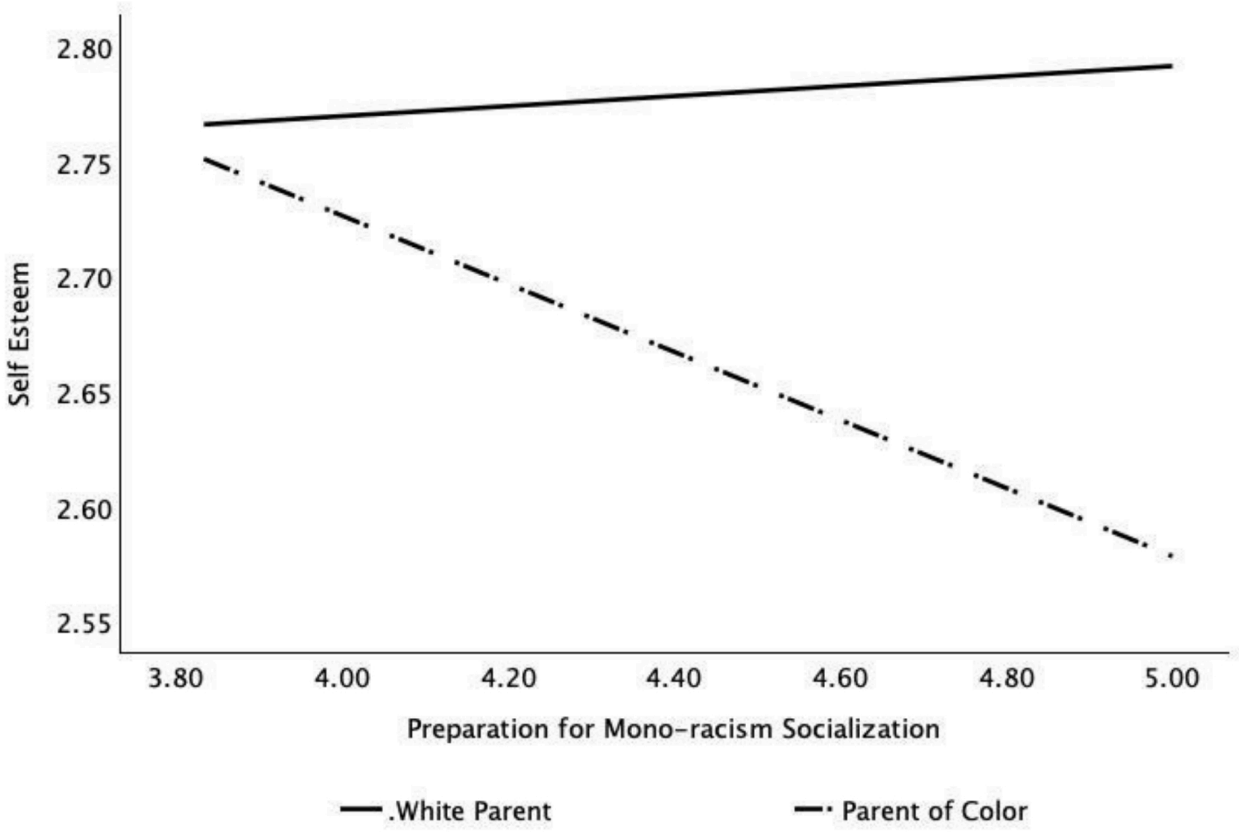


Figure 1

Moderation Effect of ERI of Caregiver in the Relationship Between Preparation for Mono-Racism and Self-Esteem

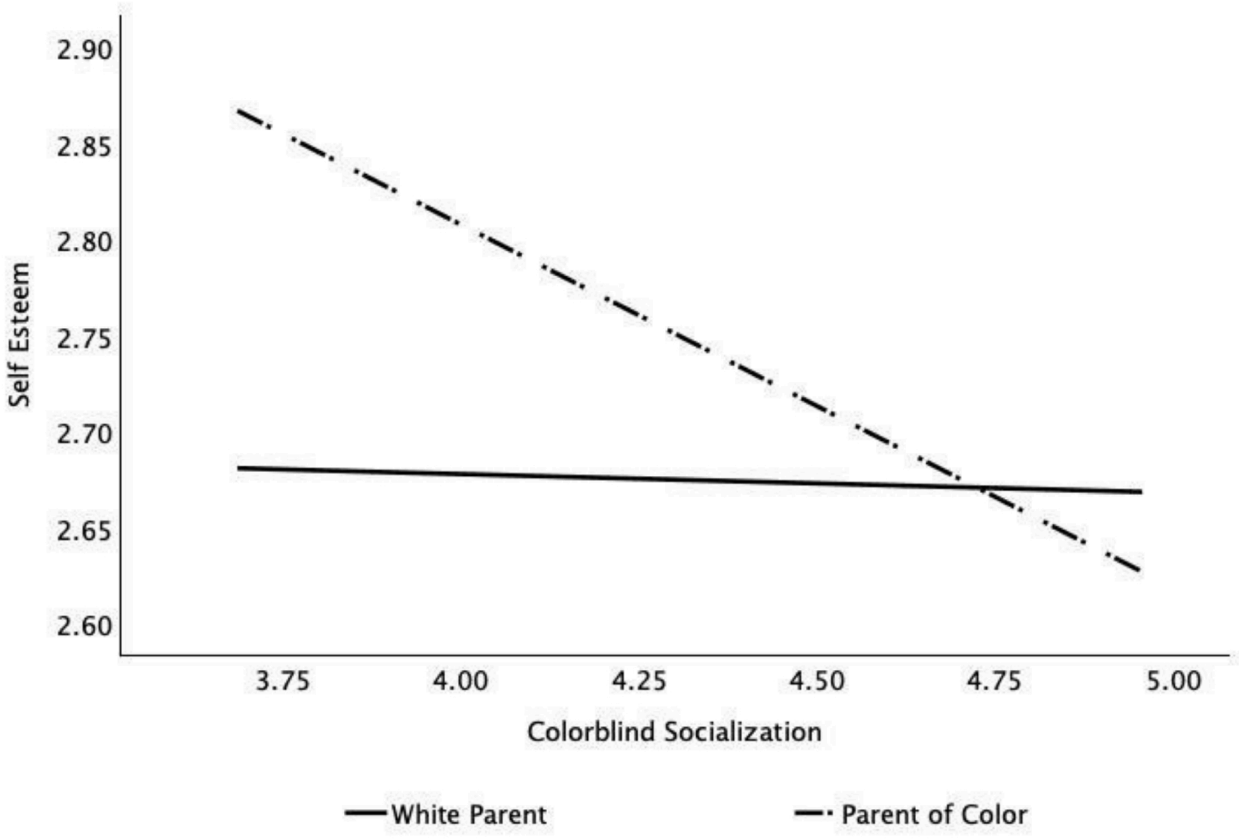


Figure 2

Moderation Effect of ERI of Caregiver in the Relationship Between Colorblind Socialization and Self-Esteem